The Greatest Gifts

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NOW COMPLETE! When you are a mutant ninja, isolated from society, you do not partake in frivolous celebrations on your birthday. You must continue with your nightly patrol, though laden with angst, reflection, and dangerous battles of the body and mind.

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The Greatest Gifts

Author's Notes:

This story is based mostly on the movies, with a small handful of elements taken from the original television series. I grew up on the original series, and I do not watch the new one.

What began as this author's "Spring-spiration" turned into a present. It's my boyfriend's birthday! Happy Birthday, Capt. Kablooey! I love you! (He's not an author here, but he does read and review under that handle.) This story is dedicated to you.

I plan to make this fic relatively short, with approximately 6 chapters, unless I find a reason to change my mind, and make it longer. (I don't want to make it too long, because I'm currently working on a BMFM fic.)

It all depends on the creative juices.

DISCLAIMER: I do not own the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. I merely borrow them so that I may write this non-profit work of fiction. I repeat, NON-profit. The story belongs to me, and cannot be used without my permission.

The Greatest Gifts

When you are a mutant ninja, isolated from society, you do not partake in frivolous celebrations on your birthday. You must continue with your nightly patrol, though laden with angst, reflection, and dangerous battles of the body and mind.

Chapter 1: Fearless Leader

A fretful wind swept across Leonardo's slick skin as he leapt through the moist air. His feet left subtle thumps as they landed on a cement rooftop. His powerful legs carried his large body with remarkable grace, as he nimbly avoided small puddles scattered amongst the uneven surface. He stopped at the roof's border, his sharp eyes surveying the grimy streets below. It was unexpectedly quiet night for a city that was supposed to never sleep. Nothing stirred, save for the occasional raindrop, and the only sound in Leonardo's ears was the lament of a troubled wind.

Leonardo walked along the parameter of the large square rooftop, scanning the scenery bellow. No sign of activity, let alone a hint of danger, or a whisper of crime. The unnatural stillness made Leonardo uneasy. It clawed at his sense of reason, for there were always crimes in progress in New York City. It was in a perpetual state of illicit activity.

For now, the city's momentary lapse from it's ruffled and dangerous character allowed Leonardo a still pause for quiet reflection.

He recalled Splinter's lecture from earlier that evening, just prior to the green ninjas' departure for their nightly patrol. He replayed the moment in his mind, escaping away into the memory...

Splinter wobbled slowly to the four turtles, the familiar click of his rustic wooden cane demanding a respectful silence from his excited sons. He silently looked upon each turtle in turn. His face was soft and affectionate, and his dark intelligent eyes overflowed with wisdom. Finally, he spoke, "Exactly eighteen years have passed since I discovered four helpless baby turtles crawling in fluorescent ooze." He then looked searchingly into their eyes, giving each turtle the sensation that their father was reaching out to their soul. He probably was. "Our lives must remain shrouded in obscurity. We dwell in the shelter of these sewers, in the safety of the shadows. This city can never learn the facts of our existence. Their world can never be ours. Their ways are different; the path of the ninja is one of deep honour and great responsibility. We have no need for wealth,

no want for material objects. Luxury is a distraction that feeds greed. I have tried to raise you above such clouding desires."

Splinter paused to take a deep breath. He let his eyelids shut, and leaned forward onto his walking stick. When he reopened his eyes, the turtles could feel serene tranquillity radiating from their sensei's body, yet at the same time their was great gravity and majestic strength. They sensed that their father's next words would settle deep into their core, that they would reflect upon them during the next days that followed, and retain them forever. The turtles held their breaths in anticipation of the conclusion of Splinter's speech, which followed only after a brief pause. "I have never showered you with material presents on your birthday. Instead, I have delivered you gifts far greater than most of humanity has ever known. The art of ninjitsu, honour, and love. Yet, they are not the most precious gifts you will know. You four turtles... are more important to each other than anything else. Each of you offer your brothers more than you realise. On this day, your birthday, reflect upon the gift that is your essence, your being, your individuality. You are gifts to each other, and to me." Splinter straightened his back and nodded his head gently, as if agreeing with his own words. He then broke into a heartfelt smile, his eyes sparkling with love. He then whispered softly, "You make me very proud, my sons."

Leonardo snapped out of his flashback. He heard feet scampering in the streets bellow, and it demanded his immediate attention. A woman was running, her arms wrapped protectively around her torn blouse. Soft sobs leaked out between her gasping breaths. The sound of her suffering pierced Leonardo's heart, as he shared in her desperation and anguish. Heartless drunken laughter and pounding footsteps followed in pursuit of the woman. Leonardo heard a man's slurred yells, "Come back here sweetheart... Give us some sugar!" The sentence ignited incredible rage from within the blue-clad turtle, but the trained Ninja channelled it into the flames of his strength.

The woman ducked into a dreary alley, an unappealing and frightful place, but definitely a step up from the pursuing gang. The men saw

her escape attempt, and ran faster. They were catching up quickly.

It was Leonardo's cue.

With a calm mind and fluent movements, Leonardo stepped off the edge of the four story building. His arms spread out wide to control his balance, as he plunged soundlessly through the air. When his feet hit the asphalt of the dark alley, his knees bent widely to absorb the impact. They dropped until his hands touched the ground, and one knee rested on the cool asphalt. He then stood up swiftly, putting himself between the drunken men, and the fleeing woman.

As the attackers and potential rapists approached the turtle, they halted their movements, and their eyes widened with unspoken horror. The masked turtle was partly shrouded in shadows, but it was clear from his ghostly silhouette that he was not human. Leonardo stared at them levelly, but remained still and silent. They seemed to be street gang, and all wore black bandanas with identical markings. The man closest to the turtle gingerly took a step forward; he appeared to be the one in charge. Leonardo didn't recognise any of them, nor the symbols they bore on their bodies. He assumed they were small players within the crime industry. They weren't even dressed impressively; the leader merely wore green camo pants, and a black hooded sweater. Although, his gruff facial features and wide frame rendered him intimidating to most people.

Leonardo was not among "most people."

The turtle's stillness seemed to bring the intoxicated man courage. He lurched forward, belting out a scream of rage. It seemed as though this man had suffered a very bad day. Still, that was hardly an excuse for his behaviour.

Leonardo side-stepped at the last moment, and the man face-planted into the ground. This released another gang member from his frozen stupor, and he started to laugh at the hilarity of his friend's embarrassment. The fallen punk stood up abruptly, and glowered at

his laughing comrade. The laughter cut out immediately, replaced by a nervous gulp.

The rough leader then turned to glare at Leonardo's back. He had fallen behind the mutant, and was now isolated from the rest of the men. He spat out a cocktail of blood, grit, and saliva from his mouth. "What sorta freakish nightmare did you come from?" he snarled maliciously. Leonardo kept his gaze held forward, but listened to the gang leader's every word and movement. His eyes didn't seem to focus on any one man in particular, giving the allusion that he was blind. In reality, Leonardo was watching all the men at once, except for the fool who was still sputtering behind him.

The infuriated gang leader hadn't expected an answer to his question, but Leonardo's continued silence was becoming quite unnerving. He quickly gestured to his men, demanding that they all attack the strange creature that stood before them. He flicked out a butterfly knife, while the rest of the gang followed his example, brandishing whatever weapon they carried on their person. A few took out hand knives, another slipped a crowbar from his jacket, and the last man started swinging a heavy chain over his head. All six of them, the leader included, started circling the mutant turtle menacingly, sinister smiles creeping onto each of their faces. Their steps slowly drew closer, and the circle steadily grew smaller.

Leonardo was submerged in a trance-like state, and was prepared for the onslaught. With adrenaline coursing through his veins, time seemed to slow down in front of his eyes. He didn't merely see and hear his attackers, he could -sense- them.

Two knife-wielding thugs lunged simultaneously, one charging from the front, the other from behind. The blue-clad ninja took a brisk step to one side. He grabbed the lunging man in front of him by the same wrist that held the knife. He swung the man around, knocking him into the attacker behind him. Together, they flew past their standing comrades, and smashed painfully into a wall. Their dropped knives clattered onto the ground.

The remaining thugs blinked quickly, their minds barely registering the events transpiring before their eyes. The creature moved freakishly quickly, and doubt was once again prominent in their minds. Their steps grew hesitant, unsure of whether they should fight or flee. Their eyes darted between each other and the mutant they encircled. They quickly nodded to each other with unspoken understanding. Raising their weapons high, they lunged forward in unison, primal screams ripping from their throats.

Leonardo's arms flew to the back of his shell and grabbed the handles of his twin katanas. He spun quickly as he drew the blades from their sheaths, the slick metal gliding soundlessly from it's leather containment. Silver glistening surfaces sliced through the air as Leonardo continued to spin. A fierce clang echoed down the alley as the swinging chain was slashed in two places, and the discarded pieces tumbled to the ground. Two of the humans tripped over the broken chain, and in their drunken state, their steps faltered and they flopped onto the ground.

The two other attackers, one armed with a knife, the other with a crowbar, still clambered toward Leonardo. The turtle ducked as a knife was thrust toward his shoulder. From the ground, he struck out at his opponent with a swinging kick. The human toppled as his legs were kicked from under him. He crashed backward onto the ground, and Leonardo heard a sickening thud when the man's head met the asphalt.

Leonardo raised his katanas and crossed them protectively over his head, just in time to block a crowbar from clobbering his skull. The iron collided harshly into the steel blades, and Leonardo's wrists reverberated painfully. The trained ninja swallowed his pain without a flinch. Still engulfed in his trance, Leonardo sprung up onto his feet, pushing the katanas forward. The man holding the crowbar was shoved backward. Leonardo swung the blunt handles of his swords forcibly down onto the man's head, and the human collapsed.

The two remaining thugs had recovered from tripping over the broken chain at their feet. Yet, instead of resuming their attack on the

ninja, they stood rigidly, their feet unresponsive to their shrieking minds. Their faces distorted in terror. One still had a firm grasp on the stubby fragment of a once beloved chain, while the other fiercely gripped his knife as though it were his lifeline. They slowly managed to step backward from the mutant, their eyes bolting between the daunting twin katanas, and Leonardo's scowling eyes.

It didn't take them long to decide their best course of action.

Each turned briskly on their heels, and sprinted out of the alley and into the streets, fleeing from a sight that would surely give them nightmares for months.

With an approving nod for his job well done, Leonardo sheathed one of his katanas, freeing his right hand. He surveyed the groaning remains of the lingering gang members. The two who had received blows to their heads remained sprawled out and unmoving. The other two who had crashed into the wall were hardly in better shape, as they struggled to peel themselves off the ground. Leonardo kept this eyes locked onto the two labouring men, as he knelt beside the pair of limp bodies. He checked their pulses, and found both beating strongly. One of them even stirred slightly under his touch. They would both wake-up with horrible headaches, but they would be fine. Leonardo knew he hadn't badly injured them, for the art of ninjitsu was extremely precise and calculated. Leonardo had been in complete control throughout the entire fight.

Leaving the two men laying on the ground, Leonardo approached the other two still struggling by the wall. One looked up at him as the turtle approached, his face a mask of abhorrent fright. He recoiled from the ninja, and smacked his back against the brick wall lining the alley. The panicked man opened his mouth as if to scream, but no sound escaped. His legs wobbled and gave out on him as he tried to run away. He staggered to the ground, but quickly picked himself up and continued his desperate flight. With one last glance over his shoulder, he abandoned his friends and disappeared from the alley.

Leonardo kicked away the discarded weapons littering the ground, as he progressed toward the last man. It was the gang's leader, and he was busy hefting himself onto his feet. Before the man could turn his head and look at the advancing turtle, Leonardo vaulted forward. The turtle's free hand grabbed the thug by his neck and shoulder, and pinned the human against the brick wall. He raised the man so that his feet dangled loosely, then pressed the point of his left blade against the thug's fleshy throat.

The man clawed at the green hand clamped around his kneck and shoulder. His face paled and clenched in alarm, as he feared the worse. His lips worded his silent plea, repeating the word "no" over and over again. Leonardo's head leaned forward intimidatingly. "Next time a woman tells you *'no'* ," he spoke in a silent yet demanding voice, "remember this moment."

Leonardo let the man drop to the ground, and stepped back briskly. The human sat shivering and blubbering to himself, unhindered tears flowing down his face. Leonardo turned and jogged out of the alley, his muted foosteps rushing into the empty streets. Without looking back, he disappeared into the shadows. Behind him, he could hear the man's quiet whimpers blending into the groaning wind.

It would be a long time, if ever, before that man laid a harmful hand on another person.

It would be eternity before that man ever forgot Leonardo, and the lesson he had been taught in that alley.

Leonardo noticed a rusted fire escape hanging on the grey building next to him. With a graceful leap, he grasped one of the metal railings, and flung himself effortless onto the rattling metal. As soon as his feet met the protesting metal platform, his legs sprung again, and he bounded upward. He climbed the fire escape like a dexterous spider, promptly reaching the building's tin roof.

As he stepped onto the noisy slanted surface, he looked around for the poor lady who had been fleeing from that gang. He could not see

her, but he wanted to make sure that she was safe. Hopefully, she wasn't stumbling around randomly in a state of shock.

Leonardo flicked out the Shell Cell strapped onto the leather belt around his waist. It was a sort of cell phone, or walkie talkie. Leonardo didn't know how it worked, that was Donnie's expertise. He merely used it. It was coloured green and yellow, and shaped like a turtle's shell. How original.

Leonardo flipped open it's cover, displaying an inactive little screen on the top, and a few dozen buttons on the bottom. He pressed a tiny switch labelled "911" in tiny letters. Again, Leonardo couldn't comprehend why his Shell Cell could call emergency services, yet couldn't dial ordinary phone numbers. It couldn't even call pizza parlours. Again, that was Donnie's field of expertise.

The ninja walked along the roof, his eyes searching for the fleeing young woman, while he distractedly spoke to a friendly 911 operator. He couldn't just leave those gang members behind in the alley. Not only did they deserve to be arrested, but two of them were still laying unconscious with unknown amounts of alcohol ravaging their system. Leonardo gave the friendly operator the location of the alley, and explained how the gang had attacked a young woman, until a "concerned individual" had intervened. Leo hung up before anyone could ask questions. He hadn't lied, and he felt good about the fight. Master Splinter would be pleased.

Leonardo quickened his steps, the tin roof rattling it's high-pitched harmonies with the turtle's every movement. With sinuous grace, he leapt from the noisy roof. His feet landed securely on the more appealing brick surface of the neighbouring building. Without a pause, he continued running toward the next building, roughly steering himself toward the direction the woman had fled. His gaze quickly panned the streets bellow, as he skipped and hopped rooftops.

His habitual movements allowed his mind to wander.

He couldn't help but brood. The leader of that gang... that despicable man... he had people who looked up to him, and he had led those people into danger. He showed them irresponsibility, and introduced them to heinous crimes. He was far worse than the "common" criminal. Even the Foot Clan weren't as shameless.

Leonardo was well aware of what it was like to be a leader, but he took care of those who followed him. He doubted that poor excuse for a man ever felt guilty when his men were injured, or shared in their tears, or felt their pain. He doubted that the gang leader layed awake at night, haunted by restlessness, his mind consumed with worry when one of his men went missing. He doubted that thug would willingly give his life to save the others.

Leonardo was well akin to such emotions, such responsibilities.

It was at that moment when Leonardo remembered his sensei's words from earlier:

...reflect upon the gift that is your essence, your being, your individuality. You are gifts to each other...

Leonardo nodded to himself quickly, before leaping into the air once more. He rolled his body as he landed onto a roof that was deceptively low, hastily saving himself from a painful impact. He surged back onto his feet, and continued his running without skipping a beat.

He understood the meaning of Splinter's words, now more than ever.

His gift to his brothers? Could such abstract dedication be enumerated? Perhaps he could place it to words... He would try.

Leadership.

It was the first thing that leapt into his head.

He was the "unofficial leader." He tried to be modest, but more often that not, he found himself adopting this duty. Unfortunately, his commanding actions were often mistakenly interpreted as pretentious. Did his brothers think he wanted to be a prized-pupil, because he strove to feel superior? Did they think he trained hard with Master Splinter so that he could suck-up more attention? Did they think he manipulated his way into becoming a leader-figure? Did they think he made all the tough decisions because he was arrogant?

Everything he did, he did it for them. For his brothers. Yet, how could he tell them that? How could he make them understand? His words never seemed to be enough.

Raph would laugh and mock him. He would call Leo a "softie," as if expressing one's feelings was a character flaw.

Michaelangelo would tell Leo to "chill out," reminding him that none of his brothers had asked him to take on such a responsibility. That Leo didn't *have* to do it, if he didn't want to. Didn't *have* to? Didn't ***have*** to! If Leonardo didn't, who would?

Neither Raphael or Michaelangelo understood the gravety of Leonardo's position.

As for Donatello... actually, Donnie probably understood Leo best. The two of them were the only brothers who weren't afraid of deep inner-reflection. Donatello was even more level-headed than Leonardo, and often found himself playing the role of "ninja peace keeper" on far too many occasions.

(See? Leonardo could admit he wasn't perfect. He had faults. He wasn't the best at everything.)

Still, Leo kept these feelings and thoughts silent. For now. It didn't bother him as much as it used to; they were all growing and maturing with every passing day. He was their unofficial leader, and they were

all gradually accepting this. No length of sibling rivalry could change this fact.

Responsibility.

Only Leonardo chose to bear the added weight, but he accepted the responsibility with open arms. He yearned for it. Ever since he was younger, he sought that extra bit of responsibility. He was a natural-born leader, and the most focused ninja amongst his brothers. Leonardo always made the hardest and toughest decisions without batting his eyes, no matter how much it pained him on the inside.

Aside from Master Splinter, if anyone could lead the turtles to safety, it was him.

It was his natural talent that led his brothers in battle, making the life or death decisions and accepting the consequences of each action.

Sacrifice.

As humble as Leonardo desired to become, he had to acknowledge the sacrifices he had made. The extra hours of practice... All that time spent alone in deep meditation...

His life was dedicated to ensuring his brother's had the best leader the art of ninjitsu could offer. It wasn't as though Leonardo has missed out on his childhood, but he did find himself growing up quicker than his brothers. While the others had watched movies all night, he had sat with Master Splinter, exploring the deep recesses of his spiritual mind. While his brothers had played their video games, he had spent countless hours in the Dojo room, perfecting his sword-work. From a very early stage in his life, him and Master Splinter knew why Leonardo trained so hard. It was the beginning of their unspoken agreement. The sensei was preparing to pass the torch down to his blue-clad son.

It was his greatest joy, offering his shoulders to bear most of weight of responsibility, so that his brothers could carry a lighter load. He

sacrificed for his brothers, he sacrificed for everyone. And yet, it hardly felt like sacrifice. It felt more like... love. Loyalty.

Love.

He loved his brothers so much, that he was sometimes overwhelmed. He wept inwardly when any of his brothers so much as shed a tear. He berated himself every time one of his brothers was hurt, punishing himself with guilt. Every night, before he slept, he vowed to himself that he would do his best to see his brothers to safety, to make all the right decisions, to pave the road for them all during the worst of times, and to lead them valiantly through the best of times.

Responsibility, sacrifice, loyalty, love; it all spelt his leadership.

It was his gift to his brothers. The greatest gift he could offer.

Leonardo was yanked from his thoughts, and his steps slowed in response to the sight in the streets below. He had finally found the woman who had been fleeing. She was safe. She had found her way to a pair of police officers. Leonardo flattened himself against the roof, and crept up to the ledge in order to gain a better view. The lady was far younger than he had anticipated. She couldn't be more than sixteen years of age. Leonardo pursed his lips, and narrowed his eyes with anger. What if he hadn't been around to help her?

Well, the young woman was safe now. Leonardo was satisfied. A female cop held the young woman while she wept on her shoulder, and the male officer spoke into a hand-held radio. Leonardo slunk away from the ledge, and ran in the opposite direction. He still had an hour left to patrol. Leaving the woman behind in good hands, Leonardo resumed to leap roofs, his conscience cleared.

While his muscular body settled back into it's repetitive routine, his mind was again free to drift.

It was such a quiet night. A little too quiet. Despite the assault Leonardo had interrupted earlier, the city was still unusually inactive. Leonardo finally realised what the silence implicated; somewhere, likely in the bad parts of town, something significant was occuring in the world of crime. Something substantially big. Like a vacuum, it was attracting New York's worse. Perhaps a gathering amongst mafia and the Foot? Maybe a territorial gang war? Whatever was happening, he knew one of his brothers would soon tumble upon it, and warn the others. They all knew they weren't to get in over their heads, not without calling for back-up.

Leonardo felt dread surfacing in his stomach. Sure, all his brothers *knew* they weren't supposed to get into fights too hot for them to handle. However, that wasn't to say all of them would *obey* that principle. He knew for a fact that Raphael wouldn't heed such precautions. "Please, oh please don't let Raph stumble upon trouble tonight..." he prayed to the starless night.

Leonardo stopped suddenly in his tracks, so abruptly that he almost tripped and fell. What was he saying. Raph was a magnet. Trouble would probably find *him* , and it wouldn't be any ordinary trouble. No small gang dispute, or woman's purse being snatched. No, not on a night like *this* . The worst kind of trouble would worm it's way to Raphael. It always did.

Leonardo tore his Shell Cell from this belt, and rapidly dialled Raph's number.

There was no answer.

Leonardo quickly made his decision. He was going to abandon the route of his patrol, and head toward the area of town Raph was surveying, which happened to be deep into the heart of Harlem. His instincts were too overpowering tonight. That wasn't a good sign. He knew something was wrong. He was ninja; in the art of ninjitsu, such feelings weren't to be brushed off as superstitions. Leonardo's keen ninja instincts were warning him. Every fibre of his body was shouting out in alarm.

He would go seek out his brother.

"Hold on, Raph," he implored, wistfully hoping that the wind would carry his message.

Perhaps it would.

To Be Continued...

I hope you all like this new fic! More will soon follow.

Please Read and Review! All criticism is welcomed! This is my first TMNT fic.

Happy Birthday, my love.

Outnumbered

Author's Notes:

Yay! is finally allowing me to upload my new chapter!

Thank you so much for reading (and in some cases reviewing) my fic! It means a lot! For all of those who reviewed, I have thank-you notes for each of you at the end of this chapter!

Ok, the rough rough rough draft of the entire story is complete! There are more chapters than I thought, and I'm bound to write a sequel. Why a sequel? Because, aspects of the plot don't resolve at the end of this fic! But let's save this discussion for a later date...

Disclaimer: I don't own the ninja turtles, but I reference them for non-profit fiction. The story belongs to me, and can only, and will only be used for non-profit uses.

The Greatest Gifts

Chapter 2: Outnumbered

Raphael examined the fractured Shell Cell cradled in his hand. *Good job, hot-head,* he mentally scolded himself. *Way to freakin' go, now you couldn't call for help, even if you wanted to...*

This is what happened when he was impulsive, and his reactions were devoid of thought... which was practically *all* the time, though he was reluctant to admit it. Raphael sighed in frustration, and critically analysed his actions from the past few minutes. He slipped into his memory of the event...

Raph was hiding on a flat rooftop, and carefully sneaking along its edge. He was intrigued by the spectacle bellow. On one side of an

abandoned parking lot, waves of darkly-clad ninjas were huddled together. On the opposite side lay a series of dark vehicles, lined protectively by dozens of men adorned with expensive black suits. The motives behind this enormous meeting currently eluded Raphael. He also had yet to catch a glimpse of the passengers inside the cars. However, Raphael understood the significance and magnitude of this gathering, and had subsequently undertaken the task of reconnaissance, hoping to bring back ***some*** *sort of beneficial information to his family.*

It was no easy task. Even passive observation was extremely dangerous, considering the magnitude of enemy ninjas in the vicinity. He could also safely assume that his enemies were secretly patrolling the area. He could be discovered by guards at any given moment. They wouldn't hesitate to use Raphael's isolation from his brothers to their advantage. The turtle had to take this situation very seriously, and so he immersed himself in deep concentration, summoning up every ounce of expertise residing in his body and mind. At that moment in time, Raphael surpassed even his own level of skill in the art of ninjitsu, the art of invisibility. Master Splinter would have been impressed.

Suddenly, to his horror, an atrocious ***bleep*** *pierced through the air, causing him to break his concentration and jump in his spot. His right hand snapped to his belt, grabbing the ringing Shell Cell. He then squeezed it in a blinding rage that only* ***Raph*** *could possess for inanimate objects. He cruelly crushed that cursed plastic communicator until it's beeps faltered comically, and were finally interrupted by a distinct cracking sound. Like most of Raph's violent outbursts, it had given the turtle a temporary rush of grim satisfaction. That Shell Cell's bleeping days were over.*

Raphael snapped out of his memory. He had failed to find the answers he sought, and had instead relived an embarrassing moment. Very embarrassing, for a ninja. Raphael had only managed to make himself angrier. And what was he currently doing? He was still crouching on that same rooftop, reviewing what had just

occurred. He hadn't accomplished *anything* except further acts of stupidity. He was a sitting duck. He might as well have presented his dead body on a silver platter to his enemies. He had to think! *Think!* What should he do?

Raphael thought further about the situation at hand. After breaking his communicator, the resulting rush of satisfaction had passed quickly, like it always did. All he was left with was a broken Shell Cell, no means to call for back-up, and a berating voice in his head that was angrily identifying everything he had done wrong. To top it all off, he had probably given away his position to his enemy. And so, Raphael found himself arguing with a voice inside his head. What should he have done differently?

*You could have called for back-up **before** you started spying on the enemy,* the voice inside his head pointed out. *You know, like you were **supposed** to.*

This was true. He couldn't blame the Shell Cell, or whoever had been trying to reach him. *Raph* was the only one to blame for this mess. The green ninja tucked the busted Shell Cell back into his belt. With bold determination, he slipped out his sais. What was done, was done. Time to go with the flow.

Don't you mean, time to tumble down the waterfall, after willingly throwing yourself into the rapids? Sometimes the voice in Raph's head was very annoying. Especially when it was right.

Raph closed his eyes, and held his breath. His ears reached out and combed the rooftop, dissecting every little detail and sound within range. He heard... a tormented wind... a low murmuring floating up from the gathering ninjas... the pounding of his own heart... a nearby foot scrapping against a pebble...

Raph's eyes shot open. He twirled his sais until their points hugged the insides of his wrists, and their blunt handles extended from his tensed fists. Yup, his cover was definitely blown. Raph grimaced, and slowly let out his breath. He tried to clear his mind, but failed

horribly. Thoughts leaked through his unstable mental defences, *Donnie needs to install a "silent mode" on these damn Shell Cells, or else I'm gonna to start leaving mine at home.*

With a low growl, Raphael spun around to face his attackers. They were ninjas, dressed exactly like the ones he had been monitoring. At this close range, the turtle easily recognised the emblems embroidered onto their dark costumes. They were the Foot Clan. A few of them seemed surprised that the turtle had heard their approach; they must be new recruits.

The turtle wasn't surprised to see the Foot Clan. Sure, Shredder had been crushed at the pier last summer. That didn't mean they had squashed out the Foot Clan itself. The only thing that surprised Raphael was the sheer number of them assembling in the parking lot below. How could they rebuild so quickly, without any of the turtles noticing? Who was in charge of their regime?

More importantly, what were they up to? What sort of horrible plans had they in store for New York? Was tonight some sort of milestone in their grand scheme?

Raph didn't wait for his enemies to initiate the attack. He sprung forward and charged the closest Foot soldier. His opponent took a step backward, swinging his pair of numchucks defensively. He tried to whack Raph's head, but the turtle ducked and punched the man in his chest. The winded soldier stumbled backward, but was quickly replaced by a masked ninja equipped with a Bo.

Raph could hear movement at his back, as other foot soldiers encircled him. He was outnumbered, and there were too many to count. He knew he couldn't single-handedly win this fight.

It was the story of his life: outnumbered, alone, and bound to loose the battle.

Raph's eyes danced with avid fury, as he uncaged the endless storm of anger that warped his view of the world. He jumped into the air,

and vividly kicked a ninja's shoulder, sending him sprawling across the rooftop. As soon as Raph landed, he carried the motion so that he squatted low to the ground, rescuing his head from a swiping Bo. Still crouched, the turtle thrust his right leg backward, cracking the shins of the ninja behind him. He heard the human fall to the ground. Raph's left hand steadied himself on the concrete, as he swung the same leg around to his front, sidesweeping enemies off their feet in the process.

Raph vaulted to his feet. He faced a soldier to his right, and kicked him in the gut. No time to watch the man double over in pain. He turned around again, and struck a ninja's face with the blunt side of his sai. There were so many of them. It was all he could do to strike at them one at a time, as they popped up from every direction. His instincts became chopped sentences, as he tried to keep up with his enemy's assault. *Punch the ninja on the right. Duck. Kick the one behind. Parry to the left. Forward roll. Evade the gliding axe. Block the kick to your plastron.* It seemed like he could barely hit his attackers hard enough to disable them. He definitely couldn't spare enough time to disarm anyone. All he could do was prolong the inevitable.

Raph could not see his enemy's faces, and their eyes were shrouded by wire mesh sewed into their masks. Still, he knew very well what they were thinking; he could smell their bloodlust. They wanted him dead, and with their superior numbers, they could easily get their wish. It was time for severe countermeasures. The turtle-in-red was going take these ninjas down *with* him. As many of them as possible.

Raphael and his brothers disliked drawing blood. Their style of ninjitsu taught the art of evasion, and disablement of the enemy. It wasn't focused on *killing* . Raph knew it wasn't honourable to seriously injure these brainwashed kids. Yet, the Foot Clan were criminals, and their youth's innocence was fleeting. Killing was the turtles' last option, but they would do so without hesitation, if it was required of them.

Sometimes, the turtles had no choice.

Raph twirled his sais around, so that their points protruded between clenched fingers. He leapt at the soldier in front of him, soaring fluidly through the air. His feet landed on a chest that caved in easily to his forceful attack. Raphael kicked off the human powerfully, and flew even higher into the air. He twirled impressively in a controlled spin that mimicked a figure skater. His feet came into contact with several heads, knocking enemies unconscious, then eventually he landed gracefully on the ground.

Pivoting to the left, he lashed out with his sais, and cut heavily into a man's chest. Crimson droplets flew through the air and splattered the adjacent soldiers. Raph turned to his right, rage penetrating deep into his core. He wasn't entirely sure if the anger was directed at the ninjas he fought, the Foot Clan's brainwashing leaders, or the infuriating disappointment in himself. It was probably a mixture of all three.

Raph thrust out his sais and gashed a man's arm, causing the gasping human to drop his katana. With an angry snarl, Raph dove into a back flip, his muscular legs flailing, and his feet bruising everything they came into contact with. When his hands roughly met the cement rooftop, the handles of his sais dug painfully into his hands. Raph relished the momentary pain. His throat released a disturbingly bloodthirsty scream while he returned to his feet.

He had barely just landed, when a powerful kick struck the back of his shell. Raph stumbled forward, and desperately tried to reattain his balance. He saw a Bo swing toward his chest. Raph twisted his body to the side, trying to dive out of the way, but the other ninja was too fast. The Bo smacked him on the left shoulder, and a searing pain tore through his body, coursing up his neck and freckling his vision with white stars. With a numb left arm, the turtle turned toward the clever ninja and pitched himself forward. His right sai plunged into the man's shoulder, and with morbid gratification, the turtle kicked the impaled man off his weapon.

Raphael ignored his injured appendage, and continued fighting. It seemed that every fallen enemy soldier was replaced by two more. It didn't take a rocket scientist to calculate that the turtle's odds were very slim. Raph needed to rethink his strategy. Better yet, he needed to actually come up with a strategy.

For a brief moment, a voice in Raph's head interrupted his staggering concentration. Maybe it was the pain from his injury playing tricks on him, but he didn't think so. The voice spouted bitterly, *Why not let them take you. Go down in a blaze of glory. End your pain, all your pain. Isn't that what you want?*

This was supposed to be his birthday. What had Splinter said before he left the lair, something about being a gift to his brothers? Yeah, right. He wasn't a gift, he was more of a curse. And now, for his brother's birthday, he would present them with his dead body. What a loving gesture.

Raph didn't know what he wanted anymore. Self-loathing and hatred consumed his thoughts, as he increased the violent rapidity of his onslaught. He let out a scream twisted with anguish as he rushed toward an enemy ninja who's confidence stood apart from the others. The man regally held an intricately crafted katana, carefully polished and sharpened, unlike the Foot Clan's usual crude replicas. The man's poise seemed to challenge Raphael to a battle that extended past the group effort of his fellow clan-members. Raphael readily accepted.

Raph's sais eagerly met the other ninja's sword, and the collision of their steel weapons resounded singingly over the chaos of the battle. The turtle deflected the swordsman's blade with his right sai, and tried to drive his other sai into the man's stomach. His opponent twisted away from the weapon's spiked tips, easily dodging the turtle's attack. Raphael bit his lip as he jabbed the soldier with the handle of the sai instead. The impact transformed the numbness in his injured arm into agony. With watering eyes and a sharp breath, Raph hesitated for only a moment.

All his enemies needed was a moment. From behind, a ninja struck the turtle's legs with a Bo, and Raph's knees buckled. The turtle managed to turn his fall into a half-controlled ninja roll, and narrowly avoided the Kanata rushing to meet his neck.

That swordsman was good. Really good.

Raphael had known his fate from the beginning of the battle, yet it was just dawning on him that he was *loosing* . For a while, he had almost felt as though he had the upper hand, but he now knew that was only an illusion. He was hurting, tiring, and succumbing to his enemy's bombardment. *Death* was one thing; Raph always accepted that he would die. He even anticipated that he would perish at a young age.

However, *loosing* was a different matter altogether.

Raphael felt flames being unleashed from deep within, engulfing his body. Flames that had haunted his soul and polluted his mind for as long as he could remember. Flames that fed on his grief and nourished his pain. Flames that threatened to devour Raphael's sanity, loosing himself to the overbearing darkness that plagued his nightmare-ridden sleep. Flames that were so overwhelmingly intense in their blinding blaze, that they made Raph's temper seem like a gentle stroll in the sunlight. Abhorrent flames that chilled Raphael's blood with such a harrowing terror, that he frantically struggled to subdue them, smother them, and suppress them, whenever shadow blackened his thoughts.

Right now, with all his other resources exhausted, those flames were all that Raph had left.

Though these flames weren't *real* fire, they still burnt and ravaged his body. Yet, from these flames Raph gathered further strength, drawing from a source that was only attainable when he lost his frail grasp on sanity. His mind was lost to negativity, and his reckless movements adopted a fiery ferocity that even surprised himself. He couldn't surpress the galling pain in his left arm, as he had been

taught. Still, he refused to favour the arm, or show any sign of weakness. Even while every movement aggravated his arm with a burning spasm that even scathed his chest, side and neck with inflamed distress.

Physical pain was nothing compared to the devastating torment boiling within.

His physical afflictions were almost a refreshing relief, or at least a distraction.

Raphael's renewed efforts helped him fight... for a short while. Unfortunately, soon his enemies were increasingly landing more hits. His muscles ached with tired complaint, and his bruises and injured arm were screaming their grievances. His face was stretched with strain, as the battle visibly took it's toll. His skin glistened with the sheen of sweat mixed with the blood of his enemies. He was pretty sure none of those crimson stains were his own...

I've lost, and I'm going to die, the thought leapt to his mind, shortly after a numchuck struck Raphael across the forehead. His vision sparkled with red and white electric flashes, as he forcibly willed his legs to continue working under his command. Half-blinded, he managed to kick the numchucker hard enough to knock him safely away. As Raph brought his leg back down, a pair of ninjas simultaneously attacked from his left and right, striking his sides with blunt weapons. He didn't even notice the type of weapons, nor did he see the ground as his face hurtled toward it.

Had he reached his demise? He seemed to remember being in similar situations before. Incredibly similar. Many times. He recalled that he had fearlessly stared into the face of death on each of those occasions. Yet, he had survived each event. How had he survived? The memories were too incomplete, too blurry. Was this time different than the others? It seemed strangely fitting that he should die on his birthday.

As quickly as those flames had been ignited, they extinguished. Raphael accepted his defeat. He acknowledged his fate. He sensed the cold embrace of darkness, he felt his suffering dissipate, and he hardly noticed as his awareness faded into the background.

His life started to flash before his eyes. Memories of his brothers and friends flowed freely in his mind. He remembered fondly watching Mikey from afar, when his brother was absorbed in his comic books... he felt himself sparring competitively with Leonardo... He saw Donatello trying to teach Raphael how to program a VCR... He caught a glimpse of himself destroying that very same VCR in frustrated anger... He pictured the first time he had met Casey Jones, and remembered how much the guy had pissed him off... He recalled his brothers' first real battle; they had gone topside, saved April O'Neal, and Raph had lost a sai...

Suddenly, Master Splinter dominated his visions. Raph could feel his father caressing his head, as he always did during the rare occasions that Raphael broke down in tears. The turtle felt his own hands stroking his sensei's bristly fur as he hugged his father in return. Raphael never cried in front of anyone else, and was only openly affectionate with his father.

His sensei became a prominent presence in his mind, and his flashbacks ceased altogether. He recalled his father's words, spoken earlier in the evening.

You are gifts to each other, and to me.

Master Splinter... his brothers... his friends...

He indeed was a curse to them all, wasn't he? He was a reckless hothead, an arrogant jerk, a short-tempered loner, a freak amongst freaks. A curse to his family. They actually cared for him---they had to, after all you can't choose family---and he never ceased to hurt them. They *loved* him, even while he taunted death, and hung precariously on the edge of a bottomless abyss.

But, a gift? No. He wasn't a gift. He could never be considered a gift. Would they be better off when he was dead? Probably not. They would only be better off if he had *never existed* , but he couldn't undo that. He was alive, he was part of their lives, and his death would bring them pain. His own suffering was worthless compared to their pain.

He had to live. For his family. Not for himself, but for those who loved him. Those who cared if he lived or died. It was the only gift he could offer.

His gift to his brothers was... that he didn't kill himself, whether by his own hand, or through his negligent actions. Though, right now he had to pull himself together before he failed them all completely... He had to try. Do his best. No, better than his best.

Raph's vision cleared, and he finally noticed that he was laying on the ground, while the foot clan delivered kicks to his limbs and torso, along with the occasional blow to his head. How long had he been like this? It couldn't have been too long, because he was still conscious. In fact, it was simply miraculous that he was *not* unconscious, though there was a distinct ringing and buzzing in his ears. His hands gripped the ground, and with a load grunt, he lifted his upper body, looking up at the enemy ninjas towering over him. He felt a brutal kick to his underbelly, and he was knocked back onto the ground. With a husky moan, he tried to lift himself again.

He looked up just in time to see the swinging katana, soaring toward his neck.

To Be Continued...

Notes to Reviewers:

pacphys: hehe, thanks for your encouragement, and for cheering Leo on! Leo's always facing great responsibilities. Let's hear it for the brave fearless leader!

leo oneal: thank you! I'm happy your liked the chapter about Leo! I've taken your kind threat (to not kill the turtles) into careful consideration, hehe! The Turtles asked me to thank you for your kindness in looking out for them, and Raph is currently giving me a distrusting look! I think they will try and escape to your house tonight, where they feel safer! Hope you keep reading!

Sassyblondexoxo: It could have been so easy to write a small, simple fic, where Leo rushes to Raph's side, only to find his brother perfectly healthy and free from harm. This would have been followed by a brotherly bonding moment, with lots of "awwwwws", and warm fuzzy feelings. But, this isn't that type of story, and I'm not that type of author.) Hey, speaking of warm and fuzzy feelings, thank you for your review! I'm glad I got that eery mood across. Hope you like the rest of the story.

misterfooch: hehe! Thanks, your review has left *me* in awed silence! I hope my story didn't peak with that first chapter. Hopefully the other chapters won't disappoint you! crosses fingers

BlueRaven: Thanks, I'm glad this plot is a success! Relieved, as well. I'm apprehensive about this first TMNT fic! This new chapter obviously answered your question, but I can give you more information. There will be chapters focusing on each four turtles, at least one each. There will even be a Splinter-centric chapter! Each four turtles will experience inner-reflection, and will get their chapters told in the "centric" third-person, if that makes sense... So far, it looks like most of the chapters will be equally Leo and Raph centric, cuz they are my favs!

jigsaws231: Wow, thank you. I don't know if I'm a good writer, but I like to think I'm on my way to becoming one! As for the plot... it is thriving with a life of it's own, and seems to have gotten too big for this simple fic!

Pi90katana: Yay! That's the best compliments I've gotten thus far! dances does the hussle is unsure how to do the hussle I try very very hard to get the characters *just* right. I study the movies when I

watch them, lol! Sometimes I read far too much into their characters and actions...

The REAL Cheese Monkey: hehe, that's a wicked name you've got there! I'm glad you liked that fight scene, I don't know if I can ever write a better fight scene. Then again, when there's only a handful of bad-guys to fight, and it's not as hectic as an ambush, the descriptions flow a lot easier, don't they? Thanks lots!

Ramica: Thank you! I'm so critical of the turtles staying in character, I would hate to stray from it myself! Your kind words make me blush, thanks lots! I'm trying very hard! Lemme know the moment I stray from their characters, or when my writing deteriorates! I really appreciate all input!

Capt Kablooey: It *is* hard being a ninja. Even harder when you are a mutant ninja, outcasted from society, with only a handful of other mutants and friends to help you, and *especially* when you have enough enemies to fill a small island... as this chapter demonstrates! Poor Raph, all the fan fic writers are so "mean" to him! He takes sooo much "abuse"!

Survival

Author's Notes:

Hello! It has come to my attention that I don't know how to spell "nunchuck," hehehe! Also, I have started writing the word "sai" as the singular AND plural of the word. One sai, two sai, many sai... if this confuses you, I am indeed sorry.

Also, I am using Canadian spelling! That means "ou" instead of "o" in words like "colour", "s" instead of "z" in words like "realise" and "hypnotise", and "re" instead of "er" in words like "centre". I just had to get this into the open, before I confused anyone! My spell checker is Canadian, and I am Canadian, so if I try to change it all to American spelling, I will get more confused than I already am! So, sorry for any inconvenience!

Disclaimer: I don't own the TMNT. This story is non-profit.

The Greatest Gifts

Chapter 3: Survival

At first, Raphael could only watch as the flashing blade of the katana fell toward his exposed neck.

Fear was not alien to the red-clad turtle, yet he was less accustomed to it than most. His death-defying lifestyle knew little of terror. Yet, there were times when fear managed to creep up on Raphael, so silently and swiftly that it sunk it's poisoned fangs into his flesh before the turtle could even detect it's onslaught. It would sweep him up and carry him down it's turbulent passage to uncharted territories, then abandon him in unpredictable destinations. On the rare occasions that terror successfully seized Raphael, it was under extreme circumstances that could even break an immortal's spirit. Like when Raphael was consumed with uncontrollable rage, and

couldn't reign himself back to sanity, surrendering to the bloodthirsty desires that even frightened his own family. That never failed to scare Raphael. Or when his brothers were hurt, or his Master missing. Those were Raphael's worst nightmares.

There was one more condition that terrified Raphael: when he faced a gruesome and maiming death that fell horribly short of his expectations.

This was one of those occasions.

After all, a ninja must have standards.

The katana fell. Raphael was afraid. His fleshy neck remained unmoving. He was paralysed; trapped by the hypnotising starlight that glinted off a blade that foretold his death.

Instantly, Raphael's most bare and basic instincts took over. It seemed that the rest of his brain had given up on his higher brain functions. His "superior" consciousness was proving to be quite inferior, at the moment. Fear had reduced Raphael to the innate abilities of the oldest section of one's brain, cleverly known as the reptilian brain.

In his case, it was quite literally a reptilian instinct that took control.

Raphael's turtle impulses asserted themselves, and his head recoiled into his shell. The blade fell, but with it's main target missing, it grazed the mutant's right shoulder instead. It sliced cleanly and effortlessly. The blade's incredibly sharp edge allowed it to cut so smoothly, that at first Raphael wasn't even aware that it had occurred, even when his right arm went strangely dead. The first sensation to creep back into the turtle's awareness was a warm fluid caressing his right arm, as it slowly regained feeling. The turtle tried to piece everything together, from the mysterious trickling heat, to the shadows enveloping his shaded vision. Suddenly a burning shock brutally replaced the flowing warmth, and Raphael was snapped back to reality.

Raphael's head flew out of his shell so quickly that he further opened his wound, and his body convulsed with an eruption of unbearable agony. His body was quickly going into shock, and when he saw all the blood---his own blood---it only worsened the situation with panic. His body trembled and his quick shallow breaths panted uncontrollably. He weakly looked up to meet the gazes of the towering Foot ninjas. His last opponent, the swordsman, stood near Raph's head, holding his impressive katana with one hand. Raph watched as the man tore off his mask and allowed the turtle to see his face. There was a tempest of hatred, disappointment and murderous rage in his freakishly red eyes. His snow-white hair and pasty face was as cold and colourless as his heartless expression. The albino swordsman had failed to take Raphael's life, and the supreme resolve emanating from his body announced that he wasn't going to make the same mistake twice. Discarding his mask onto the ground, the albino raised his katana high over his head, it's glimmering tip pointed downward. He prepared to plunge the blade through the turtle's protective shell.

However, the swordsman had made a horrible mistake. He was presumptuous and vain, and had taken a moment to emphasise his movements with majestic flourish. He had given Raphael just enough time to recover his wits.

By the time the swordsman brought his katana down to kill his prey, Raphael was prepared. He rolled onto his back, narrowly avoiding the descending blade. Without a body to catch the sword's descent, the katana struck the cement violently. It quivered loudly, bending from the impact, but not breaking. The swordsman cried out in pain, dropped his weapon, and grasped his jolted wrists tightly.

Raphael didn't dare to try and move his right arm. Although his left arm was still battered and tender, his newly wounded shoulder overpowered all his other afflictions. He hardly noticed anything else. However, he was still acutely aware of the enemy soldiers surrounding him while he still lay vulnerable on the ground. Remarkably, Raph still had a firm grip on both sai. Careful to not cut

himself with his own weapons, he grabbed his wounded shoulder with his left hand, and hugged his right arm securely against his plastron. He kicked his legs up and arched his back, and the springing movement propelled the rest of his body into the air. His agile feet swiftly tucked themselves under his body, and firmly planted onto the cement. Raphael landed in a crouched position. With a quick breath to brace himself against the pain in his shoulder, he straightened his legs. There he stood, composed and ready to fight, as his alarmed enemies stared in astonishment.

Raph had to find a way to escape the rooftop, a way where his enemies couldn't follow him... or *wouldn't* follow. All he needed was a head-start... Raphael tucked his right hand into his belt, hoping that his bleeding shoulder would remain relatively immobile. He lashed out hectically with his left sai to ward off his enemies. He managed to get his back against the edge of the building, which limited the amount of ninjas that could attack at once. Unfortunately, there was a downside to this arrangement: he was now backed-up against the edge the building, and it looked to be about a ten story drop... No ninja could land that fall.

Raphael smiled through his pain, dizziness and anger. Of course! No ninja would follow him down a precipitous ten-story drop, and if he survived, he would have a head-start. He might actually escape. *If* he survived the fall.

"See you on the dark side," Raph shouted loudly as he psyched himself for the fall. He tucked his sai into his belt. His left hand grasped the short cement railing lining the rooftop, and he gently swung himself over.

So far today, Raphael had walked into an ambush that his own negligence had *created* , he had gotten his shell whipped by the Foot Clan (*who would just go away* , no matter how many times they killed Shredder), he had destroyed his Shell Cell which isolated him from his brothers, he had nearly been killed by his enemies, he had been nearly destroyed by the darkness within him, and to top it all off: he had just jumped off a building.

Just another typical day in Raphael's life.

As he plummeted, vast amounts of adrenaline pumped into his veins, enough to last a lifetime, and time slowed down dramatically. Raphael had no idea how he was going to survive the fall. Even in a healthy state, he wouldn't be able to land such a drop. In his current weakness, even his less injured arm wouldn't be able to catch and hold his weight. His best chance for survival would be to slow his descent. Somehow. Raphael reached out his left hand, and the building tore his palm as it flew past. Spreading out his fingers, he searched frantically for a ledge, a window sill, a pole, rough texture, *anything* he could get a grip on. As his descent quickened, the building dug callously at his skin and nails. Raphael ignored the pain. As he rapidly advanced toward the asphalt of the street, he became more and more desperate.

A window sill finally met Raphael's raw hand, and his bleeding fingers hastily grasped the ledge with fierce determination. His freefall came to a jarring halt, and his dangling body cruelly wrenched his shoulder, threatening to rip off his arm. Raphael gasped, and lost his grip. He resumed his plummet toward the ground. The building continued to savagely chafe his hand as he fell, and although he didn't get another opportunity to latch onto something, he had succeeded in slowing his descent. He looked down and braced himself for the impact.

His feet roughly struck the street, his legs collapsed, and he rolled harshly on the asphalt, his body tossing and lurching rigourously until his rolling mercifully ceased. Raphael laid motionless and breathless on the pitiless ground, as he was plundered by upsurging pain. His body howled and revolted furiously. His left ankle felt like it had twisted, his backbone was bruised and his torso battered, his arms and legs were skinned, the ringing in his ears had returned with full force, his left hand was a mess of blood and lacerated skin, his left shoulder was swollen, and his other shoulder was spilling blood. Yet, he was still alive. He was even still conscious.

All things considering, Raphael thought he was doing very well.

Time returned to it's normal rate. Raphael managed to subdue his body's attempted mutiny, and he peeled himself off the asphalt. He ignored his twisted ankle and haggard body, and started running. He had successfully gained himself a head-start, and had left his enemies behind to scratch their heads and wonder what in the world they had done wrong. Still, Raphael knew he had lost the battle, especially when he saw his blood seep through the fingers that clenched his right shoulder.

His breaths rasped feverishly as he galloped down the street. He didn't bother to keep in the shadows, nor did he look over his shoulder to check if he was being followed. He *knew* he was being pursued, even if the misty fog hid his profile, and the loud wind masked his footsteps. The ninjas were following him, he knew this with fixed certainty.

Besides, he was leaving a trail of blood. That was always a bad thing to do when you were a mutant. Yet, he didn't care if he left behind vast amounts of suspicious DNA, he didn't even care who saw his humanoid turtle form. He was falling into the most vital and primitive instinct under which an animal could function. Or in his case, a human-turtle hybrid. Raphael was operating in survival mode. Very little mattered. There was only one thought entering his mind.

Don't stop running, he told himself. Even as his breathing grew more constricted, and he couldn't get enough oxygen into lungs, he did not slow down. As he started to loose feeling in his leaden feet and stiffening legs, he didn't stop running. Even though his bleeding shoulder ached and twinged with every stride he took, and agony stabbed it's tortuous needles into the entire body, he still bravely continued his flight. As his head was overcome by a relentless migraine, and his consciousness floundered and yearned to detach from his body, Raphael demanded that his legs continue to move, continue to heed his mental orders.

Only death could stop him now. He wouldn't even loose consciousness first, he wouldn't allow it. He would simply drop dead,

and until either that happened, or he safely found refuge, he *would not cease running.*

Raphael's methodical movements seemed to be fuelled by inertia, otherwise he wouldn't have been able to keep up his pace. He knew his enemies weren't as exhausted as he felt, and by now they were probably starting to catch up. He had to find a way to gain some sort of advantage, and quickly. His darting eyes searched the area. The buildings were familiar, but he couldn't connect them in his mind. This unnerved him, because he *knew* he recognised this street, but his mind was too confused to verify his eyes' signals. His disorientation wasn't a good sign.

On the verge of panic, Raphael saw a faint glimmer of hope materialise through the hazy humid weather. A manhole cover! The sewers! It was the most beautiful sight his eyes had beheld all week. Relocating the chase into the sewers was a clear advantage. The turtles thrived in the sewers, and it just might be the upper hand he so drastically required.

Raph accelerated and sprinted awkwardly to the manhole cover. When he reached it, his legs gave out on him and he fell to his knees. Raphael used a sai to pry the heavy metallic disc away from it's restful pose. It was much harder than it should have been. His shoulders were throbbing, his left hand was bloodied and stinging, and his arms just didn't have enough strength. After moving it only a few inches, Raph had to kick it the rest of the way. He dropped clumsily into the murky underground, not even bothering to close the entrance behind him. Without even trying to get his bearings, he chose a random direction and ran. The sound of streaming water and his uneven breathing echoed loudly in the tunnels. It was easier to focus his senses now that he was sheltered from the howling wind, and he could hear the faint splashing of the Foot ninjas trailing behind.

Raphael tried to limit the noises that he was producing. He managed to disturb less water as he ran, but nothing could be done to stifle his struggling breaths. They sounded so excruciatingly loud in his ears,

although he doubted that his enemies were close enough to hear them. He tried to zigzag down random paths and intertwining tunnels, doing his best to loose his hunters. He got the impression that he was making progress, as the sound of his followers grew distant.

Raphael suddenly ran into a large sewage conduit, and instantly recognised the storm drains above. Everything about this tunnel was familiar, even it's smell. He was thrilled and relieved to realise that he knew exactly where he was, finally! Raph silently climbed the closest ladder. He planted his left shoulder firmly underneath the manhole cover, and using his body as leverage, the heavy metal lifted easily. Within seconds, he was topside and standing inside Central Park.

He kicked the manhole cover back in place, uncaring for the beaconing sound that it made in the sewers. Central Park was his haven. He was almost as familiar with this park as he was with the sewers, and it possessed endless amounts of hiding places. Raph limped onto the trees and bushes, straying as far from the main paths as his weary legs could carry him. It wasn't until his entire body screamed for rest, and his vision was too blurry to spot the tree trunks he was continuously tripping over, that he finally surrendered. With one last strenuous effort, he hefted himself up a tree, and nestled his body between two thick branches.

What a night. This would certainly be a memorable birthday. Hopefully he could still make it home before anyone worried. Raphael struggled to collect his thoughts. It was challenging to think with all the blood loss...

Oh, right, the blood loss, Raph thought sheepishly. *I should probably do something about that...*

Raph dug out a roll of gauze from a small leather pouch in his belt. Donatello had started forcing his brothers to carry bandages with them, wherever they went. Raphael didn't need to ask why; Donatello was far too practised in stitching up his family's wounds. Raph awkwardly tried to bandage his shoulder, noticing that his cut

wasn't *too* critical, but just deep enough to be troublesome. It was the sort of injury that wasn't immediately fatal, and didn't chop though any main arteries. It instead grazed his muscles and large veins. Even if it took hours, the blood would seep out continuously, draining his body until the injury was stitched up. Pressure would help inhibit the blood flow, but it would not stop it altogether. Raph tightly wrapped his entire upper arm as best he could, knowing that it wasn't the proper way to dress a shoulder wound, but it was all he could manage while cramped and balanced in a tree, along with the surplus of abuse his body had taken that night. Raphael saved a bit of gauze for his damaged left hand, because although it wasn't as serious an injury as the gash on his shoulder, his hands were also important to his immediate survival. It was crucial that he had full mobility and usefulness in his both hands.

With those tasks complete, Raph focused back on his racing thoughts. Had he lost the Foot? Had they followed him here? Should he risk going back to the lair?

Raphael remembered the last time he had been trailed by foot soldiers. There had never been any concrete proof, but Raph knew in his heart that he had led his enemy to their hidden home. His arrogant actions had led to the capture of his beloved father, his sensei. No, Raph couldn't lead the Foot Clan to their new home. As much as he wanted to live for his family, their *own* survival was far more important.

There had to be another way, a different solution. Raph grabbed the Shell Cell out of his belt, and looked it over again. Of course it was still cracked. He hadn't expected it to have miraculously repaired itself. Raphael flicked it open anyway, and gave it a closer look. It seemed that the tiny view screen was cracked, along with some of the outer plastic casing. However, the buttons and entire bottom half was still intact. Raphael was making progress; usually he completely trashed his communicators until they were hardly recognisable. Donatello could probably fix this one up in no time. Assuming Raph ever saw him again...

As he continued to stare at the Shell Cell, a thought came over him. He remembered a time when Mikey had cracked the LCD screen on his gameboy, but the rest of it had still worked. Of course, Mikey couldn't play games on it anymore... but the games still *loaded* and still *worked* . Raphael wondered... perhaps he could get his Shell Cell to work, if only just partially. He obviously wouldn't have visual, but he didn't actually *need* the visual components to communicate, as long as the intercom's main parts still functioned. Maybe...

Raph tried to turn on the communicator. Nothing happened. Raph randomly pressed buttons. Nothing happened. Raph swore aloud. Realising he was supposed to be hiding, Raphael then swore inwardly. In his light-headed state, he was easily forgetting his need for silence, and he was mind was clouding-over with frustration. This wasn't getting anywhere. What power source did the Shell Cells use, anyway? Didn't Donny say something about a back-up interface, or battery? Just another technical detail that had sputtered from Donnie's mouth... Well, at least Raph knew what a battery was, and that was a start.

Raph grumbled as he turned the communicator over so he could look at it's back. Amidst the cracks and damage, Raph could see a faint seam in the plastic casing. It definitely looked like a place to hold batteries. Raph was pleased to see how easily the back slipped off, and he felt victorious when he found a battery inside. It was unlike any battery he had ever seen, and it was without labels. For all he knew, Don could have created it himself.

"Now what?" Raph wondered out loud. Big deal, he had found a battery. He had hardly fixed the communicator. Why was he even wasting his time with this busted piece of junk? Not knowing what else to do, Raph poked the battery with his bandaged thumb. The turtle blinked in surprised when he heard a small "click" as the battery snapped into place. "You gotta be kidding me..." Raph said bewilderedly. He spun the Shell Cell back around, and noticed that a few of the buttons had lit up. It was firing back to life! Raph had fixed it! Sorta... Well, all he had done was correct a loose battery, but while

stuck up in a tree, hunted by enemy ninjas and slowly bleeding to death, it felt like an amazing accomplishment!

Raph wanted to cry out: "I'm da man!" In fact, he almost did, but just stopped himself in time. He eagerly pressed a blue button that would have called Leo. Nothing happened. Raph's smile faltered. *Oh, no...* He quickly tried to call Casey. Nothing happened. He was starting to growl with anger, his hatred for the Shell Cell rekindled. He tried to call Master Splinter, Mikey, and even April, but again, nothing happened.

Raph's breathing quickened as his hope was replaced with vexation. There was only one button left that could help him, and it was purple. "Come on, you worthless hunk of garbage," Raphael threatened, "if this doesn't work, you'll discover exactly how my sai mangles wretched machines that piss me off!" Raphael leaned toward the communicator menacingly, his face adopting an angry scowl, as he continued in a dangerous snarling voice, "Trust me, you *don't* want to go there."

Raph slowly pressed the lonely-looking purple button, his last and final hope. A purple light flickered slightly in response, but after a short moment, it sparked and burnt itself out.

"Huh?" Raph uttered in confusion. Was it working or breaking? He couldn't tell.

The seconds crawled by at a tortuous tempo while he waited for some sign from his communicator. The wind wailed, a plastic bag rattled as it was tossed by the elements, and a bird flapped it's wings. Nothing else happened. Raph's breath caught and his heart sank. "No..." Raph's hand started to tremble, and violently urges enveloped his mind.

Before Raphael could do something rash, the intercom suddenly crackled, and Donatello's voice filled his ears. "Raph, are you there?" Raphael let out his breath, and his anger was immediately snuffed out.

"Donnie!" Raphael blurted quickly, as he basked in his happy relief.

"Raph?" Don responded in a confused tone. "Why aren't I getting any visual?" He heard Don let out an exasperated sigh. "What have you managed to do *now* to your Shell Cell?"

"Donnie..." Raph hesitated. There was so much he wanted to tell his brother, and unwanted emotions were tumbling over him. He was starting to get embarrassed, if he didn't get ahold of himself and start acting normal, his brothers would never let him live it down...

"Raph! What's wrong?" Raph was surprised by the immediate concern in his brother's voice. Don probably sensed something was wrong. He always was so very smart...

Raph paused. What was he going to tell him? Should he ask him to come get him? No matter how badly Raph needed help, he was always reluctant and ashamed to admit it. He decided to merely state, "I ran into trouble..." Raphael always understated situations. Whenever Raphael actually confessed that he was in trouble, his brothers knew that translated into "disaster."

"Are you alright? What happened?" Donatello's voice sounded stressed.

Was he alright? That was an interesting question. Physically or mentally? Of course Raph knew what Donnie meant, but he still hated that question. He was always overcome with a strange dread whenever he was asked that question, a feeling close to panic that caused him to clam up and push others away. It was as if he had a horrible secret, and if anyone ever learned about it, he wouldn't be able to live with himself. Even as he lay bleeding and faint, he still was stabbed with apprehension, and couldn't find an answer. He only managed to utter an unintelligible "Uhhhh..."

Raphael was interrupted by a faint beeping. Was it just his imagination, or was his Shell Cell making a weird sound? Donatello

didn't say anything for a few seconds, then he heard heavy breathing and movement over the intercom. Was his brother running?

"Raph..." Donnie paused, almost as if he was searching for the right words. "How bad is it?"

His brothers knew him too well. Raph looked at his shoulder. His bandage was soaked, his arm was coated with scarlet wetness, and his vision swam when he moved his head too quickly. He didn't want to even give Donatello an answer. He opened his mouth to respond, but a spasm of pain had decided to choose that exact moment to wrack his body. Raph groaned loudly, and leaned back into the tree while his vision was visited by black swirls. He gasped loudly and quickly as he tried to bear through the pain without loosing consciousness, and struggled to save himself from going into shock. When his vision cleared and the agony dissipated, Raph realised Donatello was frantically calling out his name. He felt a twinge of sadness and guilt in his chest. His brother deserved better. "I'm still here," Raph managed to vocalise between clenched teeth.

"Raph..." Don paused, then added, "Can you make it back to the lair?"

Raph caught Donatello's double meaning. His brother was still trying to determine how badly injured he actually was. Raph wondered why his brothers felt as though they always had to walk on eggshells around him. He didn't wonder for long. "I don't think I'd make it," Raph admitted, remembering how disoriented he had been moments ago. He knew that was the last thing Donatello wanted to hear. Raph sighed weakly, and was about to describe to Donnie his exact location when movement caught his eye. He was surprised he had even caught it through the darkness and fog, in his feeble state and blurring vision. His scrutinising eyes scanned the area and caught further motion.

It was too late; they had found him. He must have been too loud... but how had they found him so easily? Was this the Foot Clan's

trap? Were they planning an ambush? Were they on some sort of ninja turtle hunting rampage?

Raphael couldn't do it. He couldn't give out his location. He couldn't bring himself to do it. Especially since he still felt guilty about Splinter's capture. Survival was the most important issue at hand. His family's survival. It mattered more than his own life. It was far more important than any pain they would feel at his death.

"Donnie..." Raphael tried to summon up the courage to say farewell. "I gotta go... They... they found me, Donnie."

"No, Raph," his brother answered quickly, "Don't hang up!"

"I'm... sorry..." it took every bit of resolve for Raphael to force those words out.

"Talk to me, Raph, what's going on?" Donatello's words were agitated, and if Raph didn't know any better, he would have said his level-headed brother was panicking.

"The Foot..." Raph whispered, as he tried to pick them out among the bushes, shadows and trees. There were so many of them... So many... Too many...

"Raph..." Donatello began to plead, but Raphael had to interrupt him.

"Donnie, I gotta go," Raph said uncomfortably.

"No, Raph, please..." Donatello begged as his breaths grew more ragged. Raph couldn't tell if it because his brother was sprinting quicker, or if he was crying, or both...

"Donnie," Raph's voice wavered, and he hesitated. He cleared his throat, and continued in his usual gruff voice, " *Good-bye* Donnie. Tell the others I said... *good-bye* ... will ya?" Even in worst case scenarios, Raphael was horrible at expressing his feelings. He knew Donatello understood what he really meant.

"Raph, no... just hold on Raph, do you hear me? *Hold on!* " This time it was unmistakable; Donatello was definitely chocked up.

Raphael couldn't bear to hear Don's pleading voice any longer. He hung up on his protesting brother.

It was time. He would protect his family. He wasn't afraid. He tucked the Shell Cell into his belt, oblivious its tiny blinking light, and its faint beeps and clicks. He ignored the tiny voice in his head that wondered why Donatello never asked him for his location. He had more urgent thoughts in his mind. He dropped soundlessly out of the tree.

"Come on out, you cowards!" Raphael shouted out to the shadows, surprised to hear how strong his voice sounded. That short rest in the tree had done him quite a bit of good. Raph jogged through the park as he sought a clearing. He stumbled onto the shore of the Harlem Meer, a deep lake located in the north of Central Park. It was perfect; there was definitely enough room to fight here.

Raph positioned his back to the lake, and watched as Foot soldiers slunk out of the shadows, their movements measured and predatory. One after another, they appeared, so many that Raphael lost count. He wasn't going to let these bastards ambush his family! He would take a stand. Some things were more important than one mere death.

Raphael braced himself and carefully tested his right arm. Pain seared the limb, but this time he was prepared, and it wasn't as shocking. It was quite sobering though, and Raphael gasped. He grabbed his pair of sai, and twirled them intimidatingly.

"You want a piece of me, huh?" Raphael shouted angrily. He spat in their general direction, the veins on his temples twitching with fury, as hid red mask flapped violently in the wind. "You wanna finish me off?" he continued venomously. "Fine! I'll meet you all at hell's gates!"

Raphael stood his ground, and did his best to instil fear into his enemy. His promise to survive for his brothers was forgone. He had replaced it with a vow to protect his family with his life. Besides, he was already damaged. He wasn't sure what he was going to accomplish tonight, but it was something he *had* to do. In a way, he was redeeming himself for exposing their lair to the Foot, a few years ago...

Raphael wondered if this night could get any worse.

Above him, the grimacing grey clouds overheard Raphael's thought, and mistook it as a challenge. With a mighty heave, they opened up and released a fury of pouring rain.

"Great..." Raph muttered, and cursed himself for jinxing the night even further.

To Be Continued...

Notes to Reviewers:

The REAL Cheese Monkey: Hehe, another threat to NOT kill Raph! You can threaten me all you want, because you can't trust me to not kill off characters. However, that is -not- the question you should be asking. You should be asking: can you trust the TMNT to get themselves out of tough situations? I know that I trust the turtles more than I trust myself as a writer, hehe!

misterfooch: Oh no, you are suspicious of my true intentions! Very well, I shall reveal them to you. I am Marklar from the planet Marklar. I have come to conquer this planet with the clever use of adjectives! Behold my plan:

Step 1: strategically-placed adjectives

Step 2: -?-

Step 3: World Domination!

Muahahaha!

I am glad you still like the story, hope you like this new chapter!

Mikaela's Spade: Yay, I'm glad you like my style of writing. I'm relatively new, so I'm trying to get into a flow... trying to find -my style-! Hehe, I don't have rough drafts because I'm a diligant writer, I have rough drafts because if I don't, I will have thousands upon thousands of plot holes! rough drafts are my brain-farts prevention plan!

BlueRaven: hehe, so it sounds like 3 out of the 4 turtles are your favourites, hehe! Poor Donnie, we just won't tell him that he comes last! Of all the turtles, Raphael is my #1 favourite, followed closely by Leonardo. I'm in love with Raphael! I'll do my best to satisfy all the Raph fans out there. I'm happy you like my fic so far, I hope I don't disappoint you!

Pi90katana: hehe, "totally tubular, dude!" thank you very much! When you say the last two movies, do you mean TMNT 2 and TMNT 3? The first movie is my absolute favourite! I hope you've seen it! It's the -original- movie, hehehe! My stories are mostly based on what I see in that first movie, to tell you the truth... but I do study all three of them! I've started watching the new cartoons recently, and I really like them. Did you ever see the original cartoon, the one that started it all?

Ted: hahaha, Raph's medical bill. If he used health care, he would owe them tens of thousands of dollars by now! I hope Raph doesn't know where I live, because with all the abuse he's taking in my story, he's not going to be very pleased with me! hehe! Hope you like the new chapter! And sorry, I can't spell "nunchucks", and I'm doubly sorry if any canadian spelling bothers you!

jigsaws231: I'm glad you like my Raphy interpretation! He's really a smart guy, you can tell from the movies and even the cartoons! I

have full faith in him, but he is going through a rough time. Poor Raph, when will you learn that you don't face your demons by throwing yourself into battles that you can't win? Please tell me, did I do well with Raphael in this chapter? Now he's conflicted between living and protecting his family, clashing guilt-trips, I hope I didn't go overboard? Thank you for pointing out the correct spellings! I have no idea myself, I tried to ask the internet for advice, but I couldn't find any concrete answers, lol! I'm glad you came around, let me know when I make further mistakes! Am I using the word "sai" correctly now?

captkablooey: haha, Don -could- put a vibrate mode on the Shell Cells. -Or- Raph could think first before he acts. Either solution would work. Oh, there are more and more layers in Raph's angst-ridden mind! The layers just don't STOP!

Last Stand

Author's Notes:

Hello everyone! Thanks for reading thus far! Yay, I finally updated! I'm aiming to release one chapter per week, because it's warm outside and I don't want to miss out on Spring because I'm too busy editing my story. Sorry! hehe. I hope everyone is enjoying the lush warm weather and sunlight.

Once again, notes to the reviews are at the end of the chapter! Feel free to leave more reviews! It makes my writing much better! I left pizza for the reviewers... but I warn you, Mikey ordered it, and I don't recognize half the stuff on it... well, it's your problem now! Enjoy!

Okay, onto the boring stuff.

Disclaimer: I don't own anything, and this story is not for profit. You could sue me, but this story is basically free advertisement, not to mention you would gain nothing from suing me. Hey, if I'm in debt, and you sue me for all I am worth... and that's negative dollars... does that mean you end up giving -me- money?

The Greatest Gifts

Chapter 4: Last Stand

Raphael dug his feet firmly into the moistened dirt, trying to anchor himself into the slippery ground. His sai were raised dauntingly in front of his chest, and he camouflaged his pain and weakness with a crooked sneer. The pouring rain fervently cascaded from the sky, gnawing at Raphael's flesh, stinging his wounds, and soaking his bandana and leather pads. It suited his dismal mood perfectly.

The Foot formed a semicircle in front of the turtle, their movements delayed with deliberate prudence. There they stood, posed and balanced like ravenous wolves hungrily on the verge of pouncing their prey. Raphael stood boldly as he waited for the eruption of their attack. If he had been anyone else, he would have been thoroughly frightened by the Foot's formidable display. But he was not anybody else. He was Raphael, and he was overly prepared to meet his fate. He welcomed their assault with muted breaths and restless anticipation.

The Foot charged. They were a swelling surge of black shroud, glinting steel edges, and blunt wooden weapons, all destined for Raphael.

The first ninja that met the turtle in battle wielded steel kamas, bladed weapons that looked like stunted scythes. Miniature reaper weapons. It seemed fate was mocking him.

The ninja propelled his kamas hazardously, stepping close enough to Raphael that he would have felt his breath, if it weren't for the rain. The two of them locked gazes, their warrior instincts dictating their bodies' motions, as they intimately duelled with their short-ranged weapons. They combated in a scurry of movement that progressed too fast to be discerned by the naked eye. Their various maneuvers blended and flowed together like a viperous tango. Raph flinched to the right as he evaded one of the sweeping kamas, letting his opponent's blade fall shy of slitting his throat. Raphael feinted with his left sai, then tried to covertly thrust his other sai into the ninja's chest. A kama easily trapped Raph's weapon, interrupting the turtle's clever assault. Raph leaned into his locked weapon, trying to push his enemy backward. The enemy ninja merely freed his weapon from the turtle's grasp with a fling of his arm, plainly avoiding the defensive attack, and nearly slicing into the Raph's shoulders in the process.

In the turtle's weakened state, the two were equally matched. Raph's body swerved from side to side as he evaded the razor-sharp blades. Pain from Raphael's wounds strove to strangle the turtle's

movements, but he was managing to conquer his agony, for the time being. He was biting so hard on his tongue that a metallic taste blanketed his taste buds. Although he wasn't as flexible or as fast as usual, he was doing extremely well with his severe afflictions. His vision swam and his muscles fatigued, but he fought valiantly. This was his blaze of glory. This was his last stand.

Raph saw a second ninja approach with a Bo just in time to crouch and avoid the attack. Another ninja with nunchucks crept into his peripheral vision. He was already surrounded, and he was still struggling with the kamas! This fight could quickly gain the title as the shortest ninjitsu battle in history.

Raph's sai were particularly effective against blades, as long as his timing was precise. He scrupulously watched the kamas swish through the air, close to grazing his head and shoulders. Following the rhythm of his enemy, he stuck out his left sai and caught one of the blades in mid-stroke. Ignoring his quivering muscles, his other sai locked onto the second kama just in time to block a fatal blow to his chest. With a flick of his arms, the turtle was able to snatch the weapons out of his enemy's grasp. The kamas flung through the air recklessly, then plunged safely into the lake behind Raphael, hopefully never to be seen again.

Raphael could have laughed at the disarmed ninja, if he wasn't too occupied in quelling his body's inflamed pain. The weaponless enemy ninja stumbled backward humourously, trying to recover his nerve while placing some distance between himself and Raph's sai. The turtle showed no mercy. He thrust his left sai into the man's stomach, and was rewarded with a grotesque gurgling. Raph roughly extracted his weapon, and shoved the dying ninja into the hands of a surprised Foot soldier.

Raphael abandoned the perishing ninja, and quickly turned around to combat the ninja with an undulating Bo. He jumped over the wooden staff as it swung low to the ground, and kicked the ninja's face in mid-air. Before settling back on the ground, the same leg flung backward to strike a nunchucking ninja square in the chest.

Raphael landed triumphantly amid his fallen enemies. He was back in business! Intoxicated with adrenaline, he urged more ninjas to advance with a quick gesture of his thick green fingers.

A katana was next to collide with Raphael's dancing sai. It was a scrawny ninja, and he was handling his sword poorly, in a very humiliating manner. Gawkish hands clasped the katana far too low on it's hilt, and his ham-handed movements divulged his ineptness. Raphael smiled maliciously, and caught the poorly-employed blade between the prongs of his left sai. He twisted his wrist briskly, and the katana snapped in two like brittle wood. "Don't quit your day job, kid," Raphael mocked as he kicked the shocked ninja aside. He was intrigued by the mixture of skill level displayed by the Foot Clan. Some appeared to have studied martial arts their entire lives, like the albino swordsman and the kama-wielding ninja. The rest were best described as rookies, barely deserving of the title *ninja* . The infamous Foot Clan seemed to have adopted the philosophy that quantity was more fundamental than quality. Raph supposed that their colossal numbers made up for the group's roller-coasting skill level.

A nunchucking ninja appeared before Raphael, manipulating his weapons with courageous fervour. He tactifully caught Raph's right sai, and tore it away from the turtle's hand with a quick throw of his nunchuck. Raphael gasped in a mixture of pain from his jostled bleeding shoulder, and rage at his disarmament. The tossed sai landed far outside of Raph's reach, no doubt to be trampled on by his enemy. With a mighty growl, he pitched forward with his remaining sai held confidently. His opponents nunchucks brutishly smacked Raphael's sides in a vain attempt at resistance, but the vehement turtle was too aggravated to even notice. He slashed and ripped into his attacker's flesh cruelly, and was satisfied to see the man crumble with an agonising scream. His sai didn't cut cleanly like a blade. It's spiked tips were best suited for piercing, yet an enraged Raphael wanted a gory revenge.

He stepped back from the slain attacker and twirled his deadly sai, spraying blood and gore that was quickly absorbed by the downpour. Raphael ignored his wavering vision and weakness. He jumped powerfully into the air, kicking ninjas as he twirled. Although his legs were lithe and swift, his eyes were loosing their focus, and his muscles were faltering. It was by pure chance alone that he didn't run into any bladed weapons. Raphael landed heavily onto the muddy ground with a loud splash. He quickly surveyed the blurry shapes of the toppled enemies surrounding his feet. On the outside, Raphael displayed a spectacular fanfare of endless energy and brute force, but in reality the battle was taking it's toll on his battered body. His vision was tainted red, and not only because he was angry. His tried to hide the slight wobble in his legs by stepping forward.

A swordsman suddenly jumped over his fellow Foot ninjas, and landed gracefully in front of Raphael. He wasn't wearing a mask. Raphael instantly recognised him as the albino warrior who had sliced his shoulder. The man's exquisite katana was tucked decorously into his belt, and his posture boasted his unyielding audacity. His empty hands waved back his fellow ninjas, indicating that they step aside and allow him to fight the turtle alone. The other ninjas submissively obliged, and dragged their fallen comrades away. They formed a thick wall around Raphael and the albino swordsman, and watched the pair anxiously like a bloodthirsty crowd urging on a street fight.

Raphael attentively observed his opponent. He inwardly remarked that the swordsman still held himself with cocky arrogance, but he bet his opponent had learned his lesson from their last inauspicious encounter. The albino silently studied the overtaxed turtle who stood bleeding and panting. They were both indifferent to the rain that drenched them both, and stood oblivious to the whispers and chants of the surrounding audience. Nothing else existed. There was only two of them, and their treasured weapons.

Raphael had no idea where his lost sai had disappeared to. While his opponent watched with a contemplative expression, Raph

flaunted his remaining sai as he stood aching for the human's attack.

The albino calculatedly drew his katana, and allowed his eyes to narrow. He calmly held his blade with both hands, positioning it upright in front of his blanched face. He seemed almost meditative, until he snarled in his dark and heartless voice, "We have unfinished business, *freak* ."

Raphael ate up his adversary's bait with a growl. He launched himself forward and slashed through the air with his whirling sai, shouting, "I'll show *you* who's a freak!"

Raph tried to grab ahold of his opponent's blade with his sai, but the man simply jumped out of the way, and let the turtle rush past him. Raph skidded on the mud, and pivoted around to charge his opponent again. He aimed to drive his sai into the man's torso, but the ninja spun around with feline reflexes, letting the sai strike nothing but air. As the albino twirled on his feet, his katana slammed into the back of Raphael's carapace. The turtle fell forward and slid into the mud face-first. Raphael knew that he now had a new scar on his shell, but he did not care. This swordsman was making a fool out of him. He was *toying* with Raphael.

Dripping with mud, the fuming turtle stood up and glowered at his opponent. The rainfall quickly washed the filth away, and he wished it could also cleanse his shame. With huffing breaths, Raph stepped forward slowly, but his steps were emphasised with animosity. His body trembled with nearly unbridled rage, his muscles rippled as they contracted and flexed involuntarily, and his left hand clenched his weapon tightly with white knuckles. Muddied water dripped off the points of the sai like blood.

Raph halted on the outskirts of the katana's range. The opposing pair glared at each other, then started circling slowly, their feet sidestepping on an invisible path, while they waited for the other to make a move. Neither waited very long. The human quickly lunged with his katana, his face cloaked in fixed determination. Raphael saw the change in the man's expression, and managed to jerk away from

the sword's path. Barely. The turtle responded with a thrust of his sai, and the other man promptly hopped away. Easily. The swordsman briskly brought down his katana in a fierce chopping motion. Raphael's sai reflexively lurched upward and trapped the blade, freezing the sword in mid-strike inches away from his face. The human grimaced while he tried to push his weapon toward Raphael, but the turtle firmly held his own, his flaming brown eyes meeting the human fearlessly.

They stood with locked weapons, leaning into each other as they both tried to push their adversary away. It was a battle of brawn that both refused to back away from, a ninja's arm wrestle for domination. Their weapons vibrated as their muscles shuddered with strain. The arduous effort slowly constricted Raphael's wounded shoulder, and though he did his best to suppress it, his pain eventually leaked onto his face. It signalled his wilting strength, and his body's betrayal gave Raph's opponent the extra motivation he needed. The albino took a risk, though it was a well-educated one. He exposed his right side as he moved to kick Raph's plastron. The turtle was too slow. He tried to block the attack, but failed. He would have succeeded if he had his other sai. He would have even managed to deal his opponent a lethal strike.

Raphael did not have his other sai. Instead, he received the brutal kick to his chest. Winded, he fell to the ground and his shell slid on the mud. There he lay, sprawled on his back, not even realising that his hand had relinquished his remaining sai.

This time, the swordsman was quick to deal the killing blow. His katana raced down to meet Raphael's heart. The turtle's vision was obscured as he struggled against the darkness sweeping over him. Far too late, he saw the gleaming metal glide toward him, like lighting darting through the blustering sky. Raphael bravely waited for the blade to pierce his body.

That moment never came.

Raphael instead heard the clanging of colliding steel. He raised his weary head off the frigid wet ground, and his drowsy eyes witnessed a blurry green figure prancing in front of him. Raphael didn't comprehend. He squinted his eyes and tried to focus, but the darting green figure moved too quickly for his disarranged vision. Raph looked down at his chest, as if expecting to see a hole seeping blood. His eyes managed to focus on his plastron, and he saw that it was indeed intact. What was going on? Why wasn't he dead?

The sound of yelling voices amplified in Raphael's ears. One of the voices was incredibly familiar. Wait, did he hear someone calling his name? Raphael fought defiantly to stay awake, but his body was rebelling against him. It rapidly became too much effort to hold his head upright, and he languidly let it fall back onto the mud with a thump. Panting heavily, he ordered his mind to function, and demanded that his eyes repress the ever-creeping shadows.

As he lay inert, drained and unable to move, he saw the vague green silhouette loom over him. At first he was alarmed and tried to move away, but his debilitated body wouldn't budge. He heard that familiar voice soothingly say his name, a voice who's soft depths commanded reverence. A voice who's careful and deliberate articulation reflected deep discipline and spiritual harmony. At the moment, the voice intoned high-pitched dynamics that revealed a stressful disturbance in it's bearer's strongly-maintained composure. He *knew* this voice... if only his mind could focus, or his sight... Raphael squinched his eyes into tiny slits, determined to focus on the mysterious shape. His vision shifted until the indistinct shapes morphed into clarity. "Leo..." he whispered in a cracked voice.

"Raph?" Leonardo pressingly repeated his name, and Raphael realised that his brother had been calling out to him. Leonardo's face didn't linger in his vision. It quickly turned away, and his senses detected once more the clashing of metal. Raphael struggled to sit up, his mind stubbornly screaming at his body to co-operate. He managed to prop himself up a little on his left elbow. He watched in awe as his brother fluidly sailed through the air, hovering over

Raphael's fallen body as he valourously met ninja after ninja in battle. His katana was a whirlwind of ringing metal as he battled two to three enemies at once. It made Raphael dizzy just watching his brother. He had hardly taken the time to appreciate how impressive a warrior he truly was. He usually took it for granted, knowing that Leo could pull himself through any situation, that he could conquer every obstacle he faced, like an invincible superhero.

Now, as Leonardo danced around Raphael's beaten body, he not only kept the enemy from advancing or striking, he was actually forcing them *back* . One turtle against... dozens... and it seemed like Leo could beat them all. Of course, Raphael knew from experience how that wasn't the case, but at the present moment, as Leo freshly threw himself into the battle, it seemed like he could accomplish anything.

Without warning Leonardo was suddenly back at Raph's side, so quickly that he was startled and his elbow slipped on the frictionless rain-soaked ground. The impact tore at his injured shoulder, and his vision once again faded from his grasp. Raphael cried out reflexively from the pain, but he wasn't going to surrender to the darkness. He had come this far, he wasn't going to back off now. Raph's vision stabilised once again, and he saw that Leonardo was gingerly dragging him backward with one hand, while the other held a katana that barely kept the enemies at bay.

Leonardo strategically deposited Raphael against the trunk of a large tree, leaning his wounded brother against it so that Raph could sit upright effortlessly. He felt Leo quickly squeeze his left arm reassuringly, before he let go of him completely. Placing himself protectively between Raphael and the attacking Foot Clan, Leonardo continued to fight with the same grace that Raphael had envied so much in practice. That annoying dexterity that had allowed him to win every sparring session with Raphael since the day Master Splinter had allowed them to use weapons. As Raphael watched on, he grew ashamed of his selfish emotions. How they now seemed so trivial.

Raphael would follow Leonardo into battle any day. Assuming they made it out of this skirmish alive. Suddenly, Raphael was reminded of the vow he had made earlier... How in the world had Leo found him? He wasn't supposed to... His brother had to escape while he still could! They couldn't *both* die tonight, nor could he allow Leo to be captured. Raph had spent far too much time in the sadistic hands of the Foot Clan, and he would chivalrously do everything within his power to save his brothers from that fate. Leo could still escape, and he could easily loose anyone tracking him. For his brother, there was still hope, but not for long.

Raphael tried to find his voice. It was a lot of work to slow his breaths long enough to let anything else escape from his grated throat. Why was he breathing so quickly? Raph finally succeeded. "Leo," he released in a hoarse voice, "Get out of here!"

His brother managed to shoot Raphael a shocked glance over his shoulder. He turned his head briskly back to the battle, but eventually answered, "You're delirious Raph, you don't know what you're saying."

Leo's voice was so calm, always so collected... until he got into arguments with Raphael. Leo's near-unfathomable tranquillity... Raphael relished how his hotheaded-self was one of the only forces on the planet that could phase it. He glumly wondered if Leonardo would ever miss that when he was gone. "Leo, you can still make it," he spoke more gruffly than he had intended.

"Stop it, Raph," Leonardo was already loosing his patience, and Raph didn't appreciate his tone of voice. Even to the bitter end, the two of them were still treading on each other's nerves.

Raphael struggled to raise himself to his feet, and his left arm wobbled violently from the strenuous effort. He felt his hand brush up against the unmistakable cool smoothness of metal. Raph's eyes widened when he realised that both his sai were laying next to him. Before he could further muse upon his miraculous discovery, Leonardo hurriedly arrived at his brother's side. He slowly pressed

down on Raph's left shoulder, gently lowering him back to the ground with a tenderness that contradicted the frustration he exhibited only seconds ago. "Just rest," he said softly.

Raphael could only respond with a grunt as he slumped back onto the ground and tried to regain his breath. With that, Leo jumped back into the battle, moving so quickly that Raphael could barely get a grasp on what was happening around him. He concentrated his vision and anxiously watched his brother fight. He felt helpless as he watched from the sidelines. Leo's twin blades deflected different weapons, barely blocking the enemy's attacks. Occasionally he managed to wound a Foot soldier, but the wounded enemy was just quickly replaced with another. Leonardo couldn't keep up this pace indefinitely, could he? An enemy ninja answered Raphael's voiceless question, as a katana glanced off his brother's sword and grazed his arm, drawing blood that was quickly swept away by the falling rain. Raphael's heart leapt into his throat. He *had* to convince Leo to get away, before it was too late.

"Leo..." he started breathlessly, but his brother couldn't hear his weak and waning tone. He took a deep breath and willed strength into his voice, "Leo, you gotta get out of here..."

His brother didn't even let him finish his sentence. "Cut it out, Raph!" he snapped, which ignited Raphael's short-tempered anger.

"No, listen to me!" Raph demanded, finding it easier to speak with every passing moment. " *You* can still get outta here! *You* can loose these creeps, and make it back to the lair in one piece! And you *gotta* do it before it's too late!" Raphael's thick brooklyn accent punctuated his words, helping to drive his message home.

"Shut-up Raph, you're coming with me..." Leo yelled back, his voice raising louder and turning shriller with every word. He was strained from the battle, and his facial expression was absorbed in the fight, but the irritation in Leo's voice was indisputable. Raph wasn't sure who Leonardo was trying to reassure with his words, but the red-clad turtle was fed-up with his brother's stubbornness.

"I'll cover ya, just get out of here!" Raph shouted angrily.

From his vantage point on the ground, Raph could have sworn that he saw his brother tremble. Was it from anger? Exertion? Raph was about to continue his grouched protestations, when Leo suddenly leapt vigourously into the air. His blades pulsated with a life of their own, and they resembled soaring silver wings that carried Leonardo as he twirled through the air. The katanas sliced through the rain and wind, as though the elements were unable to touch the mystical steel. The blades slashed through wooden weapons and enemy flesh in curvaceous sweeps that made ballerinas look like blundering clowns. Leonardo's pirouetting body drifted back to the ground, but his feet had barely nudged the muddy earth when he again sprung into the air. He spin-kicked ninjas with a robust leg, hurling them away as if they were repelled by magical forces. Leonardo landed again, and this time he remained standing. All the closest enemy soldiers had succumbed to Leonardo's onslaught, and were scattered on the ground while the remaining Foot soldiers took a quick moment to regroup.

For a fleeting instant, Raphael thought his brother was going to escape. Abandon the mess of enemy ninjas and disappear into the night. Without Raphael to slow him down, Leonardo could easily retreat. It was a perfect opportunity, and he inwardly begged his brother to grasp it. Instead, Leonardo turned to face him. Raphael's breath caught when he saw that his brother's eyes were brimming with encumbered tears. Raphael had thought Leo was trembling and yelling due to his brother's headstrong petulance. He had thought wrong.

Leonardo spared a moment to kneel next to his speechless brother. He grasped Raphael's arm and looked searchingly into his eyes. "Raph," he spoke in a voice laced in sadness, "I could never bring myself to leave you here. *Never* ."

Raphael understood. He nodded, and swallowed away his harsh complaints. He grabbed his two sai with his left hand, and whispered, "Give me a hand, will ya?"

This time, his brother didn't object. Leo helped Raphael stand, and even steadied his brother on his feet. Together they faced the new wave of approaching ninjas. It seemed like there was an endless supply of them tonight...

Raph brandished his two sai, aspiring to look intimidating, although he looked horribly pale, and his crimson-soaked shoulder announced his frailty. Still, he thought he saw a few Foot soldiers hesitate briefly.

Briefly.

"Leo," he gravely addressed his brother in a husky and dangerous voice, "if that's the way it's gotta be..." He twirled his sai and let them skip between his fingers. "... then we'll both go down *fightin'* ."

His brother was silent for a moment, obviously disagreeing with Raphael's brash statement, almost as if he knew something his brother didn't. That was probably the case, though it was hard to tell. Leonardo often gave that impression. Eventually, he flourished his katanas majestically, and indulged Raphael by adding to his brother's declaration, "...Together."

To Be Continued...

Dierdre: Hi! You started reading, yay! thank you kindly! Hehe, I like adjectives... obviously. Wow, you are jealous of Leo's fight scene? (even -I- am in awe of that scene, I don't know where it came from...) It's funny that you are jealous, because I'm extremely envious and jealous of your writing! Your insanely masterful grasp of the English language makes me feel like a sputtering fool, lol! It helps me strive to better myself though... a sort of inspiration! That makes it such an honour that you even considered listing this story as one of your favourites!

-(jumps up and down excitedly)-

-(runs around in a frenzy)-

-(falls over)-

I'm trying to get inside all the TMNT's heads in this fic, and introduce myself to writing them. They will all be experiencing self-reflection of various sorts, hopefully you can continue to coach my interpretation. Let me know the minute I stray from their characters... (trying to base them off the movies, as I mentioned). I'm so happy I've done such a good job with Leo in that first chapter! There will be two more Leo-centric chapters before the fic is through, so stay tuned! Enjoy!

Lunar-ninja: yay, you think I'm awesome! thank you! I'm glad my little fic has captured more readers! I hope you enjoyed this chapter, and I'd be honoured if you continued to read the next instalments! Dragons, you say? Wow, Raph should feel very loved with so many ppl that are threatening me -just- to keep him alive in this fic! Well, keep a tight reign on those dragons of yours, Raph is still alive and kickin'! yay!

kaya lizzie: in a way, I'm glad you were worried about Raph, I mean that was sort of the point, wasn't it? I'm sorry you were so concerned, but I'm glad curiosity got the best of you. I'll try my best to keep you from becoming disappointed. And yes, I like suspense... I try my best. Thank you!

Buslady Of SoCal: well, the next chapter is right here... and more chapters will soon follow, one per week, until the last chapter is posted (chapter nine). The sequel will come later, but the ending of this fic will offer a satisfactory amount of closure. I hope.

Sassyblondexoxo: WOW look at all the wonderful compliments!

-(smiles)-

-(pats self on the back)-

thank you very much! well, this fic definitely doesn't lack action! hehe. Of course, not all the chapters are going to be filled with fight scenes... it will have to settle down at some point. Hopefully I can

keep up the suspense though! I'm glad this fiction is fulfilling your high-action cravings, that's great to hear! thanks, Sass!

Chibi Rose Angel: Hmm, something tells me that you want Raphy to live... if Raph and Donnie are tied for second place, then who's your #1 favourite(s)? I love Raphy so much, even I would be sad if I killed him. Thanks for the words of encouragement, hope you liked this chapter.

The REAL Cheese Monkey: reinforcements? pfffft, Batman doesn't need reinforcements! He's got his utility belt! From Shark Repellent Spray to sulphuric acid, he can ... wait a sec... this isn't Batman! HAH you tricked me! Ah, Raph and his famous last stands... or should I say infamous. -evil grin-

jigsaws231: uncanny description of Raph? wicked! yay! Well, this last chapter was harder to write. Raph's almost passed out... I don't know how obnoxious he can get when he's barely clinging onto consciousness -shrug- but I still tried to make him Raph-like! And now I hope I still did Leo justice, in the movies he gets really emotional with Raphael, from anger to concern and sadness... that's what I'm basing this on, so... here's hoping I did a good job! Let me know! Yeah, I know it wasn't a big deal spelling sai wrong, but I thought it I should announce it anyway in case other people wonder what was hapenning, hehe. Help spread the word! I'm glad you pointed it out, I really need constructive criticism. I have -no- beta reader.

Pi90katana: thank you, I'm glad you liked this depiction of our beloved Raphael. Yes, he has a temper, yes he's gruff and rough and likes to play 'bad boy'... but he's still a ninja! an honourable NINJA! he's a good guy! He's passionate and troubled, and his short fuse is easily lit, but it's not as bad as some fic writers make him out to be, hehe. I really try to do him justice, he deserves it! Btw. I get the "family channel" which is channel 43 for me, but is probably something different for you. Well, for a while now, the Family Channel has been playing the first TMNT movie every weekend. So, keep your eyes open for it on TV! It's bound to be broadcasted at

some point! And, you are still young enough to get away with renting it at the video store, I'm sure. Hold onto those young days for as long as possible! hehe. It's worth watching. Good luck with that!

Mikaela's Spade: You demand and you shall receive! I send onto thee MORE! thank you, I try to do a good job with Raph. I agree, his character can be mutilated... which is sad, he's really a good guy, as I mentioned to Pi90katana in my rant, lol. A tough hide doesn't mean there's no heart underneath, in fact his heart is partly responsible for his tough hide... I can relate a lot with Raph, maybe a lot of people just don't understand him. Yes, I know, he's a fictional character... but he feels real.

Thank you for your encouragement, and I wish you good luck with your writing as well! I'll go ahead and review your work, see if it helps you any! I'm trying to catch up with everyone's stories, because I'm so new... I've been doing a -lot- of reading, there's sooo much out there! I'm glad you can relate with the spelling, that makes me feel better... I don't know how many americans are in the fandom, but I'm assuming there are lots.

Ted: Hope you liked the chapter! Yes, the Shell Cell technology... gotta love those Shell Cells, and gotta love Donnie's intelligence.

misterfooch: Marklar thanks you for your Marklar! I'm glad a fellow South Park fan appreciates the beauty of Marklar and the underpants gnomes! I'm glad you loved chapter 3, and thanks for the compliments! Those were the desired effects I was aiming for! So you are in the infantry... wow. Such experiences will probably give you so much more to write about, and in that way I envy you. It's scary that you are going to Afghanistan. good luck and stay safe. Let us know when you get deployed somewhere! Oh yeah, and Monty Python (movies included), Princess Bride and School of Rock are GREAT!

yes, I read user descriptions! be afraid! mua ha ha! Hey, it was my pleasure to review the Beer Bad story. I -had- to read it after seeing

"Beer Bad" and "Casey Jones" together! I literally did laugh as soon as I read that...

captkablooey: phew! the last reviewer! wow, I almost feel out of breath. Okay, you have a "weird" definition of "playing favourites" and "special attention". I beat Raph within an inch of his life... twice... yes, you could call that special attention. haha.

okay, okay, I admit it. This is -my- way of giving Raphael special attention... but this is the last chapter that shows things from Raph's point of view. And don't worry, Donnie will get to describe one of the chapters! That will be in Chapter 6, so stay tuned!

Yes, it's GPS... yes, it's clicking and beeping. Otherwise, how would the readers know anything was happening at all? it's called suspended belief! now SUSPEND YOUR BELIEF! hehe. So, you probably know exactly how I'm interpreting the science behind the Shell Cells. Unlike Leo, I do know why the Shell Cell can call 911 but can't contact normal numbers. But w/e, any explanations would be boring, lol. I see how Donnie feels...

Perseverance

Author's Note:

Hi, I'm back with an update! I'm tired of working on this chapter, so BYE BYE I'm releasing it! So long! time to work on chapter 6, yay! Sorry if this seems rushed, or if it... plain sucks. Better luck with chapter 6!

Okay, I apologize for the all the gory blood. Maybe I went overkill... heh. Let me know if I should change this fic's rating.

I'm off to update my bio, because I've been asked to by Sassy! Now it's nice and long-winded, which is an honest reflection of myself. Did I forget or leave anything out in my bio? Like the kitchen sink? Did I mention the kitchen sink?

Reviewers: there are notes for you at the end of the chapter, as always.

Disclaimer: I don't own the Teenage Mutant Ninja turtles, and there's no profit to be had here. None. ktnx.

The Greatest Gifts

Chapter 5: Perseverance

Leonardo loathed the Foot Clan.

Tremors of rage racked Leo's hands, while his eyes glared maliciously at the gathering Foot Soldiers. Some of their injured limped away, only to be replaced by fresh ninjas drifting out of the shadows. Too often had the Foot Clan hurt the ones he loved. Far too often. Tonight just added to the list of reasons why he despised them...

When Leonardo had found Raphael's battered body tonight, underneath the point of an enemy katana, he had felt as though his own life had being ripped away by the blistering claws of horror. If he hadn't managed to interrupt the enemy's blade, neither Raphael nor Leonardo would have survived that heinous moment in time.

The memory was scorched into his mind... He remembered the stabbing pain he felt in his chest, as he had fought away enemy ninjas from Raph's limp body. He had been unable to tell if his brother was dead or alive, and his heart had almost ruptured. Leo had screamed Raphael's name repeatedly, his agonized voice mimicking a broken record. His brother had been unresponsive, which had greatly distressed Leonardo, as his unanswered calls were swallowed by the morose rain. Leo had then fallen prey to an overwhelming sense of fierce panic. It had transformed his body into a hyperventilating mess, and tossed his mind into mayhem. His thoughts had reeled in a tumult of nightmarish sensations. Finally, when Leo had driven away enough ninjas, he had managed to briefly examine Raph's body. The vision of his brother's shallow breaths had rescued Leo from despair, and had stopped his world from crashing down on him. When Leonardo had heard Raphael whisper his name, albeit in an alarmingly weak and cracked voice, it had been wondrous music to the fearless leader's ears.

Of course, at the time Leonardo had been far from fearless. He still was.

Leonardo currently stood beside his wounded brother, who swayed slightly on his feet, as they waited for the next assailment of their enemy. The imminent attack. Leo struggled to find his focus, that centralised calm that guided him in his attacks. He just couldn't grasp it, he was too overcome by a broad range of rampaging emotions. Worry. Anger. Hatred. Fear.

He was infinitely worried about Raphael. His wounded brother shouldn't be forced to fight, but should instead be resting and recuperating, being cared for and tended to... anything but exerting himself even further. The only reason he let Raphael combat was the

fact that Leonardo knew he couldn't protect his brother alone. He had tried, but if he had continued to do so, he would have been badly injured himself. He would have become too wounded to save his brother. Still, he had tried... Countless of strategies and tactics had presented themselves in Leonardo's mind, but he had been forced to reject every single one. In every possible scenario, Raphael would have been left unprotected long enough for a fatal attack... Not that Leonardo felt as though his wounded brother impeded his own chances of survival. No, Leonardo wasn't that selfish. He just couldn't find a way to protect Raphael *and* escape unscathed. Not yet.

Having failed to find an agreeable solution to their plight, Leo had reluctantly agreed to let Raphael fight. Besides, his brother deserved a chance to... how had Raph so grimly put it... "go down fighting."

It all made Leonardo so angry, so furious! How dare they hurt his brother so badly! How dare they attack so dishonourably! Tonight, he would paint his swords with their blood as retribution. Ninjitsu justice.

Leonardo knew he was close to being consumed by hatred. This wasn't the first time the Foot Clan had nearly killed Raphael. In the past, they had also captured his brothers, and even kidnapped his sensei! The Foot disgusted Leonardo, and they shamed the very definition of *ninja* . If they harmed his brother any further... *any* of his brothers, the fraying thread supporting his dangling sanity would finally snap. His hostility would detonate. He wasn't usually this jaded, but the sight of Raphael had perturbed Leonardo greatly tonight, leaving him almost distraught. He felt as though he could loose himself in revenge, and it almost disturbed Leonardo when he realised that he wouldn't regret anything.

Fear. Leonardo was afraid. If he had arrived a split second later, Raphael would have perished. Raphael might still die, and so might Leo. He was frightened, but mostly for his brother. He had to do everything within his means to protect Raphael as they fought. He *had* to get them out of this mess! Leonardo was responsible for his

brothers, for Raphael. He would find a way to escape. He must. Somehow.

Leonardo succeeded in steadying his breaths. It seemed unjust that he could accomplish such a seemingly simple task, while his brother rasped painfully aside him. If he could haven given Raphael his own breaths, he would have done so in a heartbeat.

The ninjas finally rushed forward with feral war cries, warning of their resurrected determination. Leonardo still couldn't liberate himself from the distraction of his barraging emotions, but he did manage to pinpoint his concentration, if only just barely. It was all he could manage at the moment. Hopefully it would prove to be enough to win this battle. To fight his way to escape.

He would succeed. He always did.

His katanas enthusiastically met the weapons of his enemies, rising like silver flames and leaping to consume everything in their path. His right katana deflected an enemy's sword, nimbly twisting around the other blade. A subtle flick of Leo's wrist sent the enemy's sword toppling to the ground. Meanwhile, Leonardo's left katana cleanly sliced the chain of an attacking nunchuck. In a glorious flourish, the turtle's twin blades slashed the arms of both his adversaries, his flowing movements outshining those of his enemies. Blood spurted from expertly slit veins, as his crippled opponents scrambled away from the turtle's unrivalled katanas.

Leonardo did not need to kill his enemies to spill their blood. He would pluck the Foot Soldier's one by one, preserving as many of their wretched lives as possible, while demonstrating the *true* meaning of ninjitsu.

Leonardo glanced over at Raphael, who was locked in battle with another swordsman. His brother brutally slashed the ninja's masked face with his spiked weapon, exposing a young man now mutilated by a jagged cut along his cheekbone. The harsh attack took the youthful enemy unaware, allowing Raph to awkwardly disarm him,

then plunge his sai into the human's chest. The man slipped off the weapon as scarlet streams trickled between his shuddering lips. He fell lifelessly to the ground. Leonardo turned back to face a pair of attacking ninjas. He was concerned for his brother, and not only because he was badly wounded.

Leonardo ducked to avoid the swing of an incoming Bo staff. Still low to the ground, the turtle responded by jabbing his attacker's legs with his katanas. The sliced muscles slackened into rubbery noodles that could no longer support the ninja's weight, and his body folded upon itself.

Leo checked on Raphael again. With a fiercely inhaled breath, the blue-clad turtle spin-kicked an enemy who was daring to sneak up on his brother. The surprised ninja didn't know what hit him, and was unconscious before his airborne body collided cruelly into a nearby tree. As Leonardo landed from his kick, he anxiously watched Raphael clumsily evade a nunchuck, barely rescuing his dome-shaped skull at the last moment. Leonardo could see his brother's movements slowing and weakening. If only he had arrived sooner... If only Raphael had more time. They needed a miracle, and they needed it *immediately* .

Leonardo let his katanas whirl dangerously through the air like a hurricane, as he twirled and pivoted on his feet elegantly. Leo would just have to fight *harder* . He disarmed a group of ninjas by slicing through their weapons, his finely forged steel meeting little resistance. Maybe Leo could win this fight... if only Raphael could hold on a little longer. Leonardo's glinting blades glided through the air stunningly as they leapt between foes, mesmerising his victims by the bewildering rapidity of his onslaught. He slashed a nunchucker's side, while simultaneously quarrelling with an enemy katana. Leo easily disarmed his opponent's sword, while his other katana moved on to spar with a ninja's oscillating Bo.

Would the Foot's assault ever wane? Would tonight's battle ever subside?

As Leonardo flogged a soldier with his katanas, his brother's dire and strangled cry gripped his frantic ears. The blue-clad turtle spun around instantly, and fearfully saw Raphael tumble to the ground. A Bo-wielding ninja loomed over his brother victoriously. "Raph!" he called out in alarm, but before he could run to his brother's aid, an agile swordsman was suddenly blocking his path. Leonardo's katanas collided eagerly with his new opponent's single blade, while his eyes desperately tried to catch a glimpse of Raphael. When the other swordsman blocked Leonardo's attacks expertly, the turtle was taken by surprise. He looked into his adversary's face, and noticed for the first time that it wasn't shrouded, like the rest of the soldiers. The man's albino face was so ruthlessly hardened, that it sent shivers down the turtle's spine.

Leonardo attempted to dodge past the swordsman. He needed to help his brother, but the albino was extremely talented, and his single katana easily sparred with both of Leonardo's blades. He felt helpless. He couldn't fight his way to his brother's side. "Raph?" Leonardo cried out to his fallen brother, inwardly praying that his brother had managed to save himself. Leonardo inwardly chastised himself, guiltily feeling like he had failed as a leader, *and* as a brother.

"Ugh," he heard Raphael's ineloquent reply. Moments later, he saw his brother shakily standing once more, his movements sluggish but purposeful. Leo nervously realised that Raph wasn't going to last much longer. Leonardo vigilantly swordplayed with the daunting albino, determined to end this battle once and for all. He tried to parry and sidestep around his opponent, but the swordsman was perpetually able to predict his movements, and never failed to block Leo's path. Every time the turtle tried to jump over the albino, his intuitive opponent blocked Leo's effort with his sword. Beads of sweat dripped from Leo's brow, disappearing into the rainfall that flooded his skin. As he arduously duelled, a small inquiring voice nudged it's way in front of Leonardo's thick concentration. Something was different... Leonardo was no longer being attacked by other foot soldiers... only the albino...

Leonardo realised far too late why he was duelling the albino alone. He saw a surge of ninjas rush toward his brother at once, and Leonardo was powerless to stop it. His opponent smirked evilly, his arrogant expression disclosing the horrible truth, that this maneuver had been planned. The albino had been distracting Leonardo so that his fellow ninjas could kill his brother in front of his eyes.

He would *not* let that happen.

With passionate fury, Leonardo lashed out with his katanas so swiftly that his opponent's cocky smile flickered. Leonardo added a feverish intensity behind his movements that caused his adversary's grin to fade complete. The turtle then screamed murderously, and the albino's face frowned and immersed itself with renewed effort. Leonardo gathered his fears, his violent impulses, his anxious thoughts... he funnelled them all into a flickering flame in his mind's eye. One single blue flame. Leonardo fed his essence into that fiery flare, and the flame intensified in brightness as it was gradually surrounded by a black void. Leonardo's scream cut out as he added his anger into the flame, and immediately he was engulfed in a trance. The void symbolised his freedom from distraction, and the flame was his channelled strength... and it was more powerful than ever. Leonardo knew that the albino could sense the change in his demeanour, for he saw his opponent's expression falter with uneasy apprehension. The human realised that he was looking into the face of his executioner.

In a final and vain attempt to cling onto his life, the swordsman lunged forward with his sword held self-assuredly, aiming lethally at the turtle's chest. Leonardo was captivated in still tranquillity as he watched the katana approach his plastron, unconcerned for his safety, and not alarmed by the futile attack. His muscles mellowed and his stance loosened. His body became fluidly relaxed and prepared to move in any direction. As the enemy's sword drew closer, Leonardo finally made his move. His left katana nimbly swept in front of him, and caught the enemy's sword as it coursed through the air. With the albino's blade safely deflected, Leonardo's right

katana didn't hesitate to make it's fatal strike. The swift blade plunged into the albino's shoulder, piercing right through the human's frail body. Leonardo emphasised the kill by twisting his blade inside his dying opponent's torso. The albino's face contorted in shocked agony as he expelled his last sputtering breath. He suffocatingly choked on his own blood, as his vital fluids spilled from his white lips and brushed the colourless palette of his face. He convulsed once, and only once. With that, his body froze. His face was still stretched in a perplexing mix of astonished wonderment and antagonising distress, as his deadweight pulled his lax body off the turtle's sword. It was a death befitting the accomplished ninja, a renown warrior in his own circle, and a revered leader amongst his peers.

Unfortunately for him, no one except Leonardo witnessed it. Even then, the turtle was no longer paying attention. He was already running toward a staggering Raphael, watching as his brother was finally brought to his knees by his weakness and ailing injuries. Raphael's hands caught himself on the muddy terrain, and he stayed hunched over on all fours, unintentionally adopting a defeated pose as his enemies ambushed him. Raph was no longer able to defend himself. As Leonardo sprinted, fright overpowered his inner-calm, releasing him from his trance. His horror-stricken eyes watched as half a dozen weapons descended toward his incapacitated brother. Leonardo hopeless knew he couldn't stop it... Before the albino died, he had distanced Leo from his brother with his herding movements. Perhaps that skilled swordsman had won, after all. Leonardo's blood curdled as a heart-wrenching scream tore from his swelling throat, "Noooooooo!"

It was at that moment Leonardo got the timely miracle he had so desperately been praying for. From the corner of his vision, another green turtle hollered in anger as he launched himself in front of Raphael's attackers. His purple bandana flailed in the squalling storm, as his Bo powerfully bludgered Raphael's attackers. The large swooping motions of his wooden staff accentuated his body's bustling motions, mercilessly clobbering skulls and hurtling enemies off their feet. Leonardo couldn't spare any time to rejoice. Not yet. He

threw himself at the remainder of Raphael's attackers, until there was an impermeable barrier of fighting green ninjas protecting the wounded turtle.

As the enemy ninjas were being driven back, Leonardo felt his face stretch into a much-needed smile. He had no idea how his brother had found them, and no clue why he knew Raphael was in danger. At the moment, such good fortunes weren't to be questioned, but praised.

"Donnie," Leonardo addressed his newly-arrived brother amiably, "you're a lifesaver!" Donatello replied with a smile, but Leonardo caught the concern etched into his eyes. "Check Raph, I'll cover you," Leonardo added, reading his brother's mind, and trying to keep his voice confident and reassuring. He hoped he managed to mask his own worry.

Donatello wasted no time in diving to Raphael's side. His eyes quickly took in all of Raphael's wounds, then he clutched the bleeding shoulder strongly, applying as much pressure as possible. Raph's body slackened under Donatello's grasp until his brother's embrace was the only thing that kept him sitting upright. Leonardo watched his brothers as much as possible---which wasn't very much---as he strove to fight off the bombardment of Foot soldiers. Leo could sense some of Donatello's distress slip away as he held onto Raphael, and he was reassured that his brother was still living. Leonardo understood that feeling all too well. As Donatello held Raphael firmly at arm's length, they both locked gazes. Leonardo couldn't see Donatello's facial expression, but he could see Raph's face, and it looked strangely numb of emotion. As Leonardo focused back on the foot soldiers, he heard Donatello talk to their brother in an adamantly upset voice, " *Never* do *that* to me again, Raph!" Donatello was clearly referring to something that had transpired between the two of them, although Leonardo had no idea what it could be. He idly wondered what had happened.

Suddenly Donatello's voice took on an urgency that demanded Leonardo's attention, as he shouted, "Raph? Raph!" Leonardo

parried around an enemy's attacking sword, and caught a glimpse of his brothers. His keen ninja eyes quickly remarked that the red-clad turtle's face was starting to glaze over, while Donatello shook his shoulders to keep him awake, unmindful of Raph's injuries. Leonardo was flooded with dread. This couldn't happen, not now, not when they had come so far! As Leonardo distractedly swordplayed with the foot soldiers, he felt a Bo staff club his side, but he didn't care. As long as he was still standing, it didn't matter. His eyes didn't want to stray from his brothers. He constantly had to make a conscious decision to forcefully peel his eyes away, in order to block the Foot's attacks. He didn't even notice when a blade lightly sliced his thigh.

With Donatello's insistent voice and shaking hands, Raphael seemed to struggle against unconsciousness, and his glassy expression was replaced with stubborn resolve. *Yes!* Leonardo shouted gleefully in his mind. *That* was the Raphael he knew! A fighter! Leonardo fervently continued to dance with his katanas, as he exerted himself in sheltering his brothers from harm. He was relieved that Donatello had showed up when he had, his brother was so intelligent, he would know *exactly* how to help Raphael from a medical perspective. Don brought with him renewed hope.

Leonardo knew how important it was that his brother remain at Raphael's side, but he also knew he couldn't continue to shelter them both from the battle. Thankfully Donatello was aware of this fact as well. He positioned himself so that one hand could continue to apply pressure on Raph's shoulder, while his free hand maneuvered his Bo. From his position squatting on the ground, Donatello's movements were constrained, and his attacks were stunted, but he was still able to hold off the Foot's attacks... more or less. At least, it made Leonardo's task considerably easier, and just in time... *Another* fresh wave of ninjas were slipping out of the shadows and joining their fellow soldiers in the battlefield.

When is something going to let up!

No sooner had the thought crossed Leonardo's mind, did he hear an excited cheer from the air above, "Cowabunga!" A fourth turtle landed into the foray of the battle, and took position next to Leonardo. "Did ya miss me?" He chipped light-heartedly and twirled his nunchucks vividly.

A relieved Leonardo couldn't help but offer a slight laugh as he replied, "Mikey, you have *no* idea!"

Michaelango burst with pride as he threw his nunchucks at a Foot soldier's head. The turtle was very quick, and didn't permit the enemy ninja to react. The blunt wood of the nunchuck cruelly bashed into the human's face. Leonardo could have cringed at the disgustingly wet cracking sound that resulted, as bones were fractured and flesh split open. The ninja abandoned his weapons and grabbed his face with a twisted shriek. He crumpled onto the ground, holding a broken and shattered face. None of the turtles exhibited any pity for the damaged human.

The newly arrived and brightly-spirited turtle looked over his shoulder, and inspected Donatello and Raphael for the first time. His eyes enlarged substantially when he saw the poor state of their red-clad brother. "Geeze, Raph," he offered, "I know you like the colour red, but I think you've gone a little overboard tonight..."

Raphael's eyes blazed with fire as he looked at his brother squarely, giving him an sarcastic expression that read "does it *look* like I did it intentionally?" Leonardo smiled as he turned his eyes back on the ninjas. Mikey was already lifting their spirits. Sometimes it seemed that his mere presence had that effect. He also seemed to be helping Raphael keep alert. Leonardo bet those were Michaelangelo's intentions.

The occasional glance over Leonardo's shoulder showed that Donatello was no longer wielding his Bo, but was redressing Raph's unyielding wound with his own supply of fresh bandages. This time the injury was wrapped properly, criss-crossing and intertwining around Raph's chest and arm, in order to concentrate pressure on

the shoulder itself. Donatello was also continuously speaking to their wounded brother in order to keep him awake. As he finished dressing the injury, Donatello yelled over the clamour of the battle, "We must to get Raph home, pronto!"

Before Leonardo could offer a reply, Raphael's thick and slurred voice followed suit, "You guys get outta here, I'll cover ya..." His words hit Leonardo hard in his gut. They smouldered his anger, aggravated his anxiety, and greatly tested his patience... which clouded and distracted him in the battle! He furiously wished Raphael would stop saying that. Leonardo was going to get him out of here *alive* . Raph just needed to have faith.

Leonardo wasn't the only one upset by Raphael's proposed notion. He could sense that Donatello wanted to explode at their brother, though he knew Don would never follow through on such impulses. He hardly ever did. He settled on a curt reply instead, " *Shut-up* Raph."

Leonardo full-heartedly agreed with Donatello, but he felt strangely obligated to subdue his own anger and comfort Raphael. He was in such bad shape, he might not have fully realised what he was saying. "Raph," Leonardo spoke in a tone more miffed then he intended, "no one is leaving you behind, so unless you have any other suggestions..." No one answered.

However, Michaelando looked to be in his own world. As always. "Ha! How do you like that, huh?" he squealed in delight while he repeatedly struck a ninja over the head with his nunchuck. His opponent had been trying to thrust with his katana, but the orange-clad turtle was too fast. He was toying with the enemy ninja, letting the human shove his blade so that the turtle could nimbly dodge each attack. He would then reply with a fast whack of his nunchuck. With every blow to the head, the ninja's movements became increasingly oafish. When Michaelango finally grew bored of his game---and Mikey grew bored *easily* ---he slugged the human's head energetically with both his chucks. The ninja wavered on his feet humorously before landing on the ground in a tangled heap.

Leonardo was about to chuckle, but he instead witnessed a sight that made his heart leap into his throat. There was a Foot Soldier standing right behind Mikey, and he was swinging an axe toward his brother's neck! An *axe* ! "Mikey, lookout!" Leo bellowed. He watched with bated breath as his brother froze upon hearing Leo's words. Michaelango couldn't see the enemy, but his own ninja instincts were perfectly aware of the peril. Mikey's head hastily ducked into his shell, and the axe swung harmlessly through open air. Before the enemy ninja could make another move, his body suddenly stiffened, and the axe dropped neglected to the ground. The ninja rigidly pitched forward, landing onto the ground with a wet thump, and revealing a sai planted firmly into the corpse's back. Leo glanced at the Raphael, who was still seated on the ground with Donnie's arm wrapped securely around his shell. Raph was panting, and his left arm was still stretched out from having thrown his beloved weapon. Both him and Donatello were staring at Mikey's fallen attacker. Raph's expression was chillingly unreadable.

Mikey's head popped back out of his shell, and he spotted his would-be slayer laying on the ground next to an axe. Without skipping a beat, he turned back to the other ninjas and threw his nunchucks in the air animatedly. As he faced an attacking Bo staff, Mikey shouted out gleefully, "I just can't say this enough... man, I *love* being a turtle! Hah!"

Relieved that Mikey was alright, though still concerned for everyone's well-being, Leonardo's katana's gracefully played with two ninjas holding their own rough-looking swords. His mind reeled as he tried to come up with an idea, and his eyes skipped between monitoring on his brothers, watching the ninjas, and searching for opportunities. He heard Raphael's voice croaking behind him, "Remember guys... *we* are turtles." His voice was strangely pensive, very un-Raph-like.

At first, Leonardo didn't understand, but the thoughtful tone of his brother made him reflect on his words. Then it hit him. The last time Leonardo had said that exact phrase, they were also in a very tight

position. They had only managed to save themselves by fleeing into the water...

Leonardo, Michaelango and Donatello dartedly shared a knowing look. They all realised what Raphael was suggesting, and none of them seemed pleased with the idea. They all answered their brother at once.

"No, absolutely *not* in your condition!" Leonardo strongly objected.

"Raph, open-wounds and water don't mix well, not to mention you're cold-blooded..." Donatello lectured.

"Dude, you can't even stand, let alone *swim* ," Mikey tried to lightly point out.

Raph wasn't deterred by any of their arguments. He replied as evenly as he could between his panting breaths, "It's hardly... any worse... than drowning in this rain... with the Foot..."

Leonardo had to admit that Raphael made a valid point. He still didn't like the idea, not one bit, but it was still the best idea they had. It was the *only* idea they had. If they were going to do this, they had to act fast. Leonardo jumped over his attackers, safely somersaulting over the enemy weapons. He landed next to the dead ninja, who still held Raphael's sai firmly lodged in his back. Grabbing the weapon, Leo tucked it into his belt, then jogged over to where Raph and Donatello huddled. He grabbed his wounded brother under his left arm, while Donatello still held a firm grasp on Raphael's bleeding right shoulder. Donatello looked questioningly up at Leo, silently asking if this was their only choice, his eyes filled with concern. Leonardo knew his face echoed his brother's worry, but he nodded his affirmation, and together they picked their brother off the ground.

They half-carried and half-dragged their brother into the Harlem Meer, followed hurriedly by Michaelango, and closely tagged by the pursuing ninjas. The turtles knew that their enemies could only follow them so far. The mutant turtles could hold their breath for about

twenty minutes, while the humans would be lucky if they could make it past two. As they ploughed their way into the water, Leonardo took a closer look at Raphael. His colour was horrible, and his skin was pale and littered with fresh bruises and lacerations. His breathing was painfully ragged and laborious. Any steps the turtle tried to take faltered, although it didn't matter because he was fully supported by his two brothers. Still, despite the disturbingly ill image his brother displayed, Leonardo still sensed a strength in Raphael, a strength that gave him hope. They could make it. They *would* make it. Raph would make it.

As the water deepened rapidly, the turtles took a deep breath. Leonardo worriedly watched Raphael struggle to inhale and hold the air inside. He was having significant doubts about their escape plan... how could he agree to this? It was too late to change his mind now...

Together, the four turtles dove into the murky waters. They disappeared quickly under the lake's turmoiled surface, which was dishevelled from the rain. Behind them, angry Foot soldiers tried to follow their retreating forms. Some of them panned out along the parameter of the large shoreline. They searched for any sign of their fleeing foes, their reptilian prey. Some even tried diving into the lake. They hunted, they searched, and they tried to chase, but all to no avail. The turtles were gone.

To Be Continued...

Notes to the Lovely Reviewers:

misterfooch: ! you paid to read and review my new chapter! (along with checking emails and other activities, no doubt!)... but still, I don't know how to react to such an honour. Ummm, thanks! a lot! heh. Geeze, good luck with that infantry training! I hope it's going alright, and I hope you are doing okay! I think about you sometimes, because I think about everyone I know who's associated with the

army. My thoughts are with you, good luck and stay safe! Oh, and thank you for your reviews... both of them! lol

eldarsevenstar: -(helps you recover from your face plant)- -(shakes your hand)- HI! Nice to meet you. Gee, what a way to butter someone up, you sure are great with first impressions! hehe. You made me blush several shades of red! Thank you, thank you! Yeah, I got a lot of reviews, I'm so very pleased everyone likes my fic.

Sassyblondexoxo: hey, Sass! You want to know more about me! Wow... awesome! ok! I'll update my bio after I submit this. Speaking of updating... I've been compiling a list of favourite stories and authors, and of course you're on my lists! I hate to ask this... but what happened to your story "Heat"? Are you gonna finish it? Just curious, I love that fic. Hehe, I love most of your fics, and they are all gradually making their way onto my "lists". Just so you know. I'm pleased that you were so interested in my fic. Now that the action is starting to taper, I hope you aren't disappointed!

Melodist: Hello! Glad you found my story, and I'm even more glad you liked it! Hehe, I also have a crush on Leo... and there's lots of my beloved Raph in my stories, as well. So... keep on reading when you have the time! hopefully, you'll find this note, at some point... hehe. It's so funny that everyone is telling me that I am good at describing action sequences, because it's all coming from writers whom I envy! Like yourself. I can't believe how funny and sexy your stories are. They leave me rolling in laughter and light-headed! I could never accomplish that. I'm glad I have my own strong points, though! It was really an unexpected and pleasant surprise! Thanks for you review!

kaya lizzie: I'm glad my descriptions help guide your imagination, that's what I try to do. For the most part. That's why I use so many adjectives and adverbs... I hope I don't get carried away, lol. Yeah, Leo can be considered the calvary! His skill makes up for at least twenty ninjas...

Pi90katana: Yes, definitely, Leo is the most talented ninja among them! (No offence, green dudes.) It was about time Raph's brothers showed up and saved the day. hehe, there are only so many surprises I can put into my first TMNT fan fic. It was a logical progression. Raph and Leo are destined to always be fighting, especially if they live in the same roof. I like them that way... Their faults are so cute. -(cringes)- sorry I cut off my chapters where I do... I must find sadistic enjoyment in leaving my readers hanging... Yes, I did hear about that new CGI movie. I'm very happy, but also disappointed that the turtles weren't going to be people wearing turtle suits, like in the first movies... maybe because I'm old and set in my ways. "When I was your age, we didn't have no fancy smancy CGI or crazy *internets* ... and we had to walk ten miles to school everyday, through hurricanes and blizzards... and it was uphill -both-ways!" Okay, so I'm not "old," I'm just 22, and I am really looking forward to the new turtle movie! Really, I am! thank you, and see you around!

jigsaws231: Thanks for your encouragement! I have watched the old and new cartoons, and I have seen all the movies, and I agree that there seems to be stronger bond between Raph/Mikey, and Raph/Leo... compared to the bond Raph has with Donnie. Perhaps it's because Donatello is absorbed in his work, and Raph is stand-offish... that's a bad combination for developing bonds. (you'll notice that Donnie is the last person Raph tried calling on his Cell Shell, in chapter 3...) They still love each other though, very much, and they are still brothers. I was hoping to play on that in my stories, and get them to work on their bond... but we'll see.

Mikaela's Spade: oh no! (fears the pikachu of doom) ... umm, is the pikachu of doom supposed to look so cute and cuddly? I hope this chapter didn't disappoint, especially since I'm slowly settling things down... glad you like my descriptions, thanks!

Linz: Thanks, and nice to meet you. oh wow, I'm happy this is one of your favourites! -(dances)- see you around, I hope!

Chibi Rose Angel: Awwww, Mikey is your favourite? that's great! I agree, Mikey is much more than just a joker! There will be a chapter where I -try- to delve into Mikey's reflection, further in the story. Unfortunately, I'm not good with humour... something I need to work on. Mikey was also my brother's favourite turtle, and I completely respect your choice! My brother and I were the biggest TMNT lovin' couple, it's what our sibling bond was initially based on...

glad you like my fight scenes! Time for me to stray away from those, now. I can't write a story with -just- fight scenes, hehe. Yes, this is my first official TMNT fic. First ever written, other than the ones in my head! I'm going on your favourites list? YAY! that's an honour, cuz you are on my fav's lists! Yes, I -have- read all your stories. I started reading stories here lonnnng before I started submitting my own. Unfortunately, when I first read the stories, I wasn't adding them to my favourites list because I was new and stupid. Now I have to go back and track down my favourites... But I can tell you I love your writing! It's usually dark, yet not entirely hopeless, because as you said, they are a family and they are there for each other. It's a great way to get one's "dark" fix while not getting too depressed by the ending! hehe. Thanks for your reviews and support, it means a lot! I'm trying to submerge myself into this fandom, and you have all made it so easy for me. It's wonderful! I can't thank you enough!

captkablooey: thanks! I might address the fact that the Foot Clan had various extra skill levels, later on in my fic. Most of what I wrote has an important purpose... just wait till I peel away the superficial layers.

Shadowflame611: Hi shadow! thanks for dropping by! that's great! Love your stories, btw. glad you like my writing! I try hard with the fight scenes. Hehe, maybe instead of giving the pizza to the reviewers, I should have given it to Donatello for his science experiments... I bet he's itching to get his hands on it! I bet he would discover new forms of life in the "cheese"...

The REAL Cheese Monkey: Go Ninja, go ninja, go! Ninja, ninja rap! weeee!

Lunar-ninja: hehe, yes Raph was totally being a selfish man! Good observation. He's lucky Leo also didn't get chopped up while he was distracting him by arguing and being stupid. umm, you are right, pacphys hasn't informed about such a "don't kill good guys" rule... well, that wouldn't make for an exciting story now, would it? ;) I'm going on your favourite(s) list(s)! yay! thanks! -(dances like the fool on the hill)- Take care, and I'll see you around!

Phew, I don't even want to know how much of my word count is from these notes to the reviewers...

Breathe

Author's Notes:

Sorry about the delay, a lot of things have been happening. Small things, like getting sick and accidentally erasing half my story, THEN my backups... but mostly, it's been summertime. That's what's been happening, heat waves, vacations, and out-of-town friends visiting. Again, sorry about the embarrassing delay, I will try very hard to get the last two chapters out soon! Well, enjoy this next installment!

Disclaimer: I don't own the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, blablabla, but those who DO own the TMNT should not complain about fan fiction, which has been written NOT-for-profit, especially considering all the publicity, excitement and loyal fans it creates...

The Greatest Gifts

Chapter 6: Breathe

The lake's freezing water jolted Donatello's overheated body, and his perspiring muscles contracted reflexively. Diving into the lake's surprisingly chilling depths gave him a shocking yet exhilarating rush. However, Donatello barely even noticed. Oh, how he wished this was just an ordinary evening. He should be home, safe and dry, absorbed in his computer and latest electronic projects. His only concern would have been the errors popping up as he tried to compile his computer programs, or perhaps the kinks forming in his neck as he hunched over and soldered electronic components. A peaceful and normal evening.

Then again, such idealistic thoughts made Donatello question his sanity. When you were a mutant, there was no such thing as *normal*

. When you were a hunted ninja, there was no such thing as *peaceful* .

Donatello was a man of science, of logic and rational reason. He thoroughly enjoyed loosing himself in scientific theories, political contemplation, and worldly issues. The broad range of knowledge and vast trivia stuffed into his green cranium was his gift, it was his passion, and it was his life.

Tonight, he was realising that it was also a curse.

Donatello hardly noticed the jarring temperature of the lake, who's icy silken embrace greedily leeched his precious body heat. Icicle claws scraped maliciously against his leathery skin, draining physical sensation from his exerted body. Unfortunately, this numbness did not offer any merciful relief; it only amplified his mental and emotional turmoil. His mind was far too absorbed with the abhorrence of his situation. He was plagued by his cold-hearted logic, yet at the same time, his beloved objectiveness was currently unattainable, and he felt nakedly exposed without it. So helpless... his brother was dying.

Donatello held Raphael tightly as he swam downward, and the clouded opaque water eventually revealed the cluttered bottom of the lake. He noticed not the beauty of the delicate plant life as it gently swayed to the water's unheard melody. His eyes failed to notice the scurrying fish whom instinctively bolted away from the monstrous figures of the four turtles. He didn't even remark the stereotypical amount of littering bottles and old shoes carelessly freckling the underwater surface.

Donatello's attention was currently devoted to Raphael.

He kept a firm grasp on his brother's bleeding shoulder, desperately attempting to extinguish the fiery scarlet flames that continuously fed into the water. Along with the blood loss taking it's toll, Donatello could also see the effects that the cold water had on his cold-blooded brother. He knew exactly what was happening to Raphael's

body, exactly how his biology was reacting... If Donatello wanted to, (and he absolutely did *not* want to), he could calculate his brother's exact chances of survival. Quantify his brother's death. Not only were such horrendous thoughts unwanted and highly unwarranted, they were terrifying.

His knowledge was proving to be a curse. If only he could halt such trains of thought, Donatello's state of mind would greatly improve. But, he could not stop. Try as he must, he just couldn't prevent the morbid thoughts from ambushing his mind. He couldn't help knowing what he knew, nor could he control his reeling mind. He was frightened, and disgusted with himself. His ample resource of medical and biological knowledge was haunting him. Yet, if they made it back to the lair in time, it would also be that very knowledge that saved his brother's life. It was a gift, and a curse.

More than anything, Donatello just wished he could clear his mind, if only for a moment. Yet, he couldn't allow that. He had to be sharply alert in order to save Raph, and lead them out of this lake. For Donatello had an idea. A plan.

Leonardo was still holding onto Raphael's other side. Knowing his blue-clad brother, he would refuse to let go, and it was quite possible that his hands would have to be pried away. Leo seemed conflicted between watching where they were heading in the murky bottoms of the lake, and ensuring that their brother didn't fall unconscious or release his held breath. Leo seemed concerned that if he looked away for a moment, only a moment, he would loose his brother to the unconquerable force that threatened to steal Raphael from them all. Forever.

Donatello would have done anything to reassure Leonardo, or to ease his own mind. Anything to burn away the medical facts that kept telling him that his brother wasn't going to survive. That he couldn't survive.

His only salvation was in knowing that the laws of science were still broken, even in today's age.

Still, this was little solace, and Donatello couldn't stop worrying about his wounded brother. Letting Leonardo monitor Raphael's state, Donatello struggled to see clearly in the cold dark water, his eyes trying to catch a glimpse of the item he sought. They needed to swim closer to the banks of the lake, else his plan would never succeed. He would have to lead his brothers in that direction...

Donatello was concentrating so hard, and his worried thoughts were so distracting, that he didn't hear the subtle sound of bubbles releasing into the water...

Suddenly Raphael's body felt anchored, and no longer drifted easily under Donatello's guiding hands. Don's head snapped instantly toward his brothers, and found a pale and frightened Leonardo frantically helping an ailing Raphael. Leo's hand was clamped over their brother's beak, and the occasional ripple of valuable oxygen escaped his constricting clutch. Leonardo's other hand was patting Raph's face, trying to reopen his brother's drooping eyes, while desperately seeking a sparkle of recognition in Raphael's dazed expression.

Donatello's heart froze. He suppressed the scientific facts that leapt into his head, informing him exactly *how* his brother was being sucked into unconsciousness, or a coma... No, Raphael wasn't going to leave them! Donatello raised his brother's eyelid, and saw his pupil slowly fluttering out of sight, oblivious to Leo's adamant patting. No, Donatello wasn't going to *let* his brother leave them! Donatello squeezed his brother's injured shoulder cruelly, praying that at some level Raphael could still feel the agony from his wounds. He didn't know what else to do, not while they were underwater, and it was the first idea that crossed his mind. Pain was a valuable tool that told your body when something was wrong. Ignoring Leonardo's disturbed expression, Donatello brutally punched his brother's wounded shoulder, hoping that Raphael's mind would receive his message, because something *was* horribly wrong.

It worked. Even though Donatello wasn't sure *why* it worked, instead of making things worse. Raphael's eyes were suddenly wide with

shock as he dartedly glanced between his brothers. He was awake, although just barely. His face looked confused and muddled, and his eyes uncomprehending. Still, he was awake, and Donnie felt light-headed as relief flooded over him. Colour slowly returned to Leo's face, as he protectively refused to release his hand from Raphael's mouth. Donatello thought that was a wise idea, because Raph didn't seem to be aware of much, including the fact that they were underwater.

This was certainly the most stressful swim the turtles had ever experienced, and that was a concern all by itself. Their rocketing stress levels were going to deplete their lung's air reserves quicker than expected. They might be forced to resurface too early. This night was filled with surprises. Horrible nerve-racking and heart-shattering surprises.

Donatello had absolutely no time to waste. They had only just submerged minutes ago, but already the passage of time pressed down on Donatello with such suffocating pressure, that each second grazed him painfully as it passed by. Donatello indicated to Leonardo that they should follow his lead. The brainiac turtle boldly faced the direction that he suspected would lead them to the closest river bank. With Raphael tugged limple along, the three other turtles swam confidently and easily through the water. Their swift and fluid movements boasted of an innate natural grace, which they owed to their amphibian heritage.

Through the hazy black water, the sight of the softly sloping river bank materialised like a ghostly apparition. Donatello felt a temporary rush of victory; he hadn't led his brothers astray! As he noticeably felt tension in his shoulders melt into the heartless water, he finally realised the full extent of the pressures that Leonardo faced with leadership. How could he do this every day and retain his sanity?

Michaelango started to swim past Donatello, heading upward for the shelterless shore, but Donatello grabbed his leg with predatory reflexes. A confident tug halted his brother's movements

immediately. Mikey looked down at his brother in confusion, and Donatello could only shake his head. With all the Foot Soldiers patrolling the park, the turtles could only assume that their enemies would be scourging the shoreline. It was too risky to resurface, not only could they get caught, they could also accidentally lead their enemies back to the lair...

Their flight into the water had been a temporary and desperate action. Yet, Donatello had an idea that could allow them to escape reliably undetected, while providing a shortcut back home. An uninterrupted shortcut. No one else knew of his plan, not yet, but they didn't need to. They only needed to have faith in him. Donatello looked inquisitively at Leonardo, as if searching for approval. The blue-clad turtle was too intently focused on Raphael to notice... He seemed to have passively accepted Donatello's sudden reign of command, or at least trusted that his brother had a plan. Everyone else, Leonardo included, were utterly lacking any other clever ideas.

Donatello started swimming parallel to the earthy river bank, his hand still clamped on Raphael's bandaged shoulder, while his other brothers followed in close pursuit. As they continued to swim, and as Donatello searched fervently for their destination, he couldn't help but further doubt himself. Shouldn't he have found *it* by now? Had he made a horrible mistake? If so, then Raphael was going to pay for it with his life...

To state that Donatello felt butterflies in his stomach would be the grandest understatement of his entire mortal existence. His insides writhed and heaved with perturbed stress, his supper threatening to upheave itself, while churning stomach acids scorched his esophagus. Disquiet uncertainties sapped all the moisture from his throat until it was hoarsely dry, a rather frustrating affliction considering the surplus of water that surrounded him. He gulped painfully against a swelling lump, the anxious motion struggling to scrape down the cracked and moistureless terrain of his throat. He was gaining even further respect for Leonardo's fearless leadership. He now fully understood the implication of the word "fearless".

Finally, Donatello found the item he sought, and not a moment too soon. Ten minutes hadn't even passed since they dived into the foreboding lake, but his body was already strongly suggesting that Donatello seek fresh air. If he felt that way, he didn't want to think about how Raphael felt. Of course, he couldn't help *but* think about how Raphael felt, as he inwardly cursed his morbid train of thought for the umpteenth time that night.

He approached the elusive object that he had been searching. It was a steel grate that covered a moderately-sized tunnel, one of many that were designed for regulating the water levels in the Harlem Meer. If Donatello knew the layout of the sewers, (which he did *extremely* well, having studied the blueprints), then this tunnel would safely lead them out of lake and into the city's main sewer conduits. Into their domain. A direct route home, concealed from their enemy's spying eyes.

It had become obvious that Donatello's brothers finally realised his plan, for Mikey was already unscrewing the grate with a shiruken throwing-star. Donatello went to help his brother, but stopped when he felt Leonardo kick his leg in order to get his attention. He looked at Raphael, and saw that his facial expression was peacefully lax, and his relaxed eyelids were once again shut. Donatello's brow furrowed in concern as he immediately grabbed Raphael's wrist and checked his pulse. It was weak, slow and barely detectable. He was gone, sucked into the seductive oblivion of unconsciousness, a formidable foe whom Raph couldn't escape indefinitely. Donatello knew they wouldn't be able to wake him this time. Honestly, he had been surprised Raphael had remained awake for as long as he had. All they could do for their brother now would be to escape the lake, and as quick as possible. Leonardo seemed to read Donatello's mind, or at least his brother's grim facial expression. The alarmed blue-clad turtle gripped Raphael tightly against his plastron, as if his body heat could rescue their quickly fading brother. Leo gingerly replaced Donatello's grasp on Raph's wounded shoulder, and let Donatello help Michaelango work on the wicked metal bars that impeded their liberation.

The screws were slippery and hidden beneath unfathomable layers of slime. They also seemed corroded... Donatello wondered if they would respond to brute force. With pursed lips and devoted concentration, Donatello and Michaelango quickly managed to completely detach the grate on one side. Donatello hastily slipped his Bo between the grate and conduit. Using the staff as as a lever, he forcibly released the horrid grating from it's frame. The thudding noise produced by the wrenched metal sounded strangely dull through the blanketing water. Despite himself, Donatello was mildly disappointed by the lack of victorious clamour, the lack of a fanfare in ode to their intense endeavour.

Leonardo wasted no time in squeezing himself and Raphael into the conduit first. There was just enough room for the two turtles to fit cosily. Donatello went in next, anxiously watching Leonardo struggle to grip the slippery conduit as he forced himself onward.

Donatello's journey was unexpectedly interrupted when he felt a rough pulling on his toes. He looked down to see Mikey frantically waving at him to exit the tunnel. Donatello cringed as dire thoughts streamed freely in his mind, and countless horrible scenarios were suggested by his overactive imagination. What was wrong *now* ?

Donnie slipped out of his beloved passage of escape, his hands lingering longingly on the metal conduit, and his movements weighted with his reluctance. Michaelangelo was pointing at his ankle with wide eyes. Donatello's eyes also grew substantially when he noticed his brother's plight. Michealangelo had somehow managed to wedge his foot into a chasmic crack along the conduit's deteriorating edges. It wasn't even a hole, just a small gap that had been formed when Donatello tore off the grating. Still, the metal would not give, and his foot was captured.

Leave it to Mikey to find death-traps *anywhere* and *everywhere* .

It was crucial that Mikey not panic, but it looked like he was quickly falling into it's vicelike grip. Donatello tried to make light of the situation by placing one hand on his hip, and displaying his best "I

can't take you anywhere" facial expression, before quickly sliding his Bo staff from it's leather strap. Despite his inexhaustible reserve of scientific knowledge, Donatello still clung to his ninjitsu basics. It was always his first impulse for solving any problem: Donatello grabbed his Bo. Even as a science-buff and innovative inventor, he believed western civilisation highly underestimated the value of large wooden sticks.

Donatello quickly took a closer look at his brother's trapped ankle. It was securely stuck. This wasn't good. This wasn't good at all. Donnie couldn't even tell *how* his brother had managed to trap his foot in the first place. As Mikey wiggled and tried to dislodge his limb, he saw the jagged metal tear at his brother's flesh. Donatello quickly grabbed Mikey's leg in order to immobilise the foot, while he fretted over the rust and filth encompassing the torn metal. His brother relaxed under Don's embrace, the warm and comforting physical contact doing wonders for Mikey's state of mind. With a reassuring look from Donatello, Michaelangelo let his body relax, allowing his brainiac brother to take control of the situation.

That is, until he saw Donatello raise his Bo in preparation to strike. Michaelangelo's eyes enlarged and his hands started to flail their objections. It was an amusing picture of his brother, one that Donatello might have found comical, if the situation wasn't so pressingly serious.

Although Mikey's hands wildly flailed in protestation, Michaelangelo's leg didn't try to squirm out of his brother's grasp, nor did he grab ahold of the Bo to stop it's descent. Of course, Michaelango was floating awkwardly in the water due to his trapped and injured ankle, unable to move his body adequately, and incapable of verbal complaint. Still, Donatello liked to think that Michealangelo trusted him entirely.

With quick and effortless preparation, he aimed his staff, then brought it down as quickly as possible. The movement was hindered by the countervailing water, and the Bo landed right next to his

brother's ankle with a barely audible thud. The metal silently resisted with unrelenting stubbornness.

Brute force had worked the first time, Donatello didn't see any reason why it shouldn't work this time. He tried again, lifting his Bo even higher above his head, then releasing it in a fury that strove to counter the water's thick obstruction. This time, he clearly heard the vibration of the metal, as it shuddered reproachably, but it still didn't budge. Donatello pressed his lips together in purposeful determination, and brought down his Bo again. The perpetually unyielding metal mocked his iron-fisted efforts, and Michaelangelo grew increasingly nervous and agitated.

This *definitely* wasn't good. What was tonight's obsession with death? It seemed that everything that could possibly go wrong, *was* going wrong. Thus Donatello found himself worrying about two brothers now, instead of just one. In fact, he was starting to fear for *all* their lives. He prayed that fate was merely testing them, and didn't actually plan to claim half his family, all on the same evening. What sordid and wicked inspiration had gripped the fates this night, that they might attempt an ironic twist of events, and permit a humanoid turtle to drown to death?... No. He mustn't permit such thoughts. He would rescue Michaelangelo. He would save Raphael. This horrible night wasn't going to destroy his family!

Donatello paused, and tried to ease his mind enough to concentrate on the issue at hand. He was the type to think before he acted. He was also a ninja. Donatello wasn't going to give up on his approach just yet. He was just simply about it all wrong. Anyone could take a wooden staff, aim it, then thrust it forcibly at it's target. It took the correct mindset to properly wield a *Bo* . Applying force onto his beloved weapon was just an afterthought that followed his disciplined mentality. His weapon was more than just an extension of his movements, it was an extension of his body, his mind, his soul. This time, when Donatello raised his staff, he didn't just fling it toward the deceptively strong deteriorating edge of the conduit. He envisioned the Bo going *through* the metal.

Once satisfied that he was adequately prepared, he snapped his weapon down so quickly, he was nearly hurled upward. When the Bo's blunt end collided with the opposing metal, he ignored the conduit's attempts at defiance, and continued to follow through with the action. The metal warped and bent as it was pushed away by resolute wood, and Michaelangelo's foot slid free.

Donatello didn't allow himself a moment for celebration. He quickly leaned in to inspect the liberated limb, noticing that not only had the skin been lacerated from the serrated metal, it was already visibly swollen. Best not to risk Michealangelo going into shock while submerged underwater. He thrust an end of his Bo into this brother's hands, who submissively clutched it without a second thought. Donatello held onto the staff's other end with one hand, then re-entered the treacherous conduit with his brother in-tow.

It didn't take long to catch up to Leonardo, who's movements were slowed by Raph's body. Donatello was actually surprised by how quickly they had caught up. It had felt like Michaelangelo had been trapped forever, but that had obviously been an illusion brought on by stress. As he was reminded of his brother's close-call, he looked down quickly to ensure that his brother was still attached to the other end of his Bo.

The tunnel's gentle incline reassured Donatello that they would soon find themselves in the sewers. Still, when he saw the small pipes feeding tap water into the tunnel, he knew they had reached the end of their watery passage, and not a moment too soon. Not only did Donatello's lungs burn yearningly for air, but he was starting to believe that this claustrophobic and dreary conduit would become their ghastly depressing tomb. Leonardo and Raphael's legs quickly disappeared from the water, and Donatello suspected that Leo had pulled them out of the passage. Before his lungs could discard rational control, and succumb to reflexive impulses that would inhale contaminated water, Donatello's head finally broke through the water's surface with a satisfying smack. He expelled the polluted air

from his lungs, and greedily sucked in the stale and rank air. Never before had the smelly air of the sewers felt so nourishingly fresh.

He quickly hefted himself out of the icy water, and clambered onto the soggy and grimy bricks of the sewers. His body hugged the ground welcomely as he crawled away. Still holding onto this wooden staff, and his movement leaden with tired constraint, he lazily pulled his Bo out of the water. He heard the distinct splash of his brother breaking free of the water's perilous grasp. He forcibly willed himself to find the energy to pull Michaelangelo out of the water, and helped his brother to lay beside him. As Donatello sucked in more rejuvenating air, and as the weight of their predicament pressed down upon him, he felt his strength return with full force. Donatello quickly checked on Mikey's ankle. It didn't look much worse, and his brother gave him a thumb's up as he panted fresh oxygen eagerly.

Leaving his brother to rest momentarily, Donatello turned toward Leo, who sat cradling Raphael in his lap, desperately stroking the motionless turtle's face as he whispered desperate words of encouragement. As Donatello crawled toward them, his soft-speaking brother looked up with untold fear in his eyes. "He's not breathing," his voice wavered with loud and high-pitched tones. Donatello hastily scrambled to Leo's side, who gently yet swiftly lowered his brother to the uninviting damp ground. Leo tilted Raph's head back and cupped his hands around his gaping mouth, while Donatello grabbed their brother's lifeless wrist. He gasped at his wounded brother's cold flesh. How could he have let Raph talk them into escaping through the water? What sort of idiotic lapse of reasoning had snatched him on this awful night?

Fate was surely pushing their limits, as if tonight was some horribly unethical test.

Donatello would never have imagined that after holding his breath for nearly twenty minutes on the bottom of a lake, he'd be holding his breath again so soon. He couldn't breath, he couldn't talk, all he could manage to do was watch Leonardo breathe for their brother,

as Donatello clung onto Raph's wrist, frantically searching for a pulse.

Moments like these were Donatello's worst fear. A bombardment of sensations that warned of a pivotal episode in the tale of his life. A horror so unfathomable, that mere words couldn't describe the cyclone of thoughts and emotions that savagely tore at his heart, a horror that left it's mark on his soul. Waiting, with bated breath, he prayed to whatever gods---or demons---happened to overhear his desperate plea... just to detect a heartbeat. Any heart beat. Unsurpassable fear strangled his throat, uncontrollable panic constricted his chest excruciatingly... He felt like he was dying himself. Only through paramount feats of inner-strength did his sanity remain intact, if only just long enough to wait for that heartbeat. Those cursed eternal seconds where he restlessly awaited to uncover what fate had dictated not only for his loved one, but for himself. Selfless, selfish, fearful, dreadful and desperate thoughts accumulated in such magnitude, that Donatello distinctly felt as though his head was about to burst...

Not nearly as quickly as the anxious moment commenced, it was brought to a heart-wrenching finale.

Donatello dug his fingers further into Raph's wrist, careful to not mistake his own heartbeat for the one he so desperately sought. He was adamantly determined to find his brother's circulation, and he was not disappointed. He felt a faint and highly irregular pulsation in Raph's arm. "He's alive, though barely," Donatello breathed, feeling exhausted, and left ravaged from his emotional fears. He watched in angst as Leonardo breathed into their brother, determined to resuscitate the fading spark in Raph's body.

With every life-giving breath Leonardo granted into Raphael's lungs, he stepped back for a brief moment, waiting for their brother's muscles to resume on their own. Every time nothing happened, and Leonardo hurriedly gave Raph another breath. Donnie continued to monitor their brother's pulse as he watched unblinking, hardly aware that Michaelango has fallen to his knees beside him. He heard the

orange-clad turtle silently plea for their brother to return to them, but he barely heard his words. His own mind was racing as he fearfully wondered if Raphael was dying, or if he had gone too long without oxygen underwater... if he would live only to be a vegetable for the rest of his life.

He watched with wide eyes as Leonardo gave Raphael another breath, but this time Raph gently convulsed, coughed, and drew in his own shaky breath. The moment was so exhilarating that Donatello felt dizzy. He slumped and had to hold himself up with a trembling arm that gripped the ground. Michaelango squealed his joyful congratulations, "Way to go, Leo!" The blue-clad turtle smiled as some of his stress was alleviated, but wasted no time in scooping Raphael into his arms.

Donatello had led them to a short-cut, and from the layout of the city's water pipes, he knew exactly which path would take them home. He quickly squeezed Leo's shoulder, but before he took off running, he remembered another brother who was also in need of aid. He briskly helped Mikey up, and with his arm linked firmly around his shell, helping support Mikey's weight. Donatello started running in what he confidently assured them was the correct direction.

"How far away... from the lair?" Leonardo inquired between gasping breaths.

"Not too far..." Donatello responded unconvincingly, while struggling breathlessly to speak while he ran. "Maybe Raphael should... start patrolling areas *closest to home* ..." Donatello pondered gravely.

Mikey responded with a weak chuckle, and offered his own opinion, "Dude... Raph shouldn't be allowed... to patrol *alone* ... ***ever*** ."

Leonardo gave Mikey an annoyed glance, obviously seeing no humour in his brother's statement. Yet, he didn't comment. Donatello noticed that while Leonardo carried Raphael tenderly in his arms, he also held a firm grip on their brother's wrist in order to monitor his

pulse. Or maybe to simply assure himself that their brother was still alive.

Leonardo turned back to Donatello. "How long?" he asked, his abruptly short sentence speaking volumes in it's urgency. Donatello felt panged by his brother's persistent questioning, for Leo wasn't going to like his answers...

"Approximately..." he hesitated nervously, but covered it up by pretending to do a mental calculation. "...about twenty-five minutes..." he finally blurted out. Leonardo gave him an appalled look, and Donatello felt guilty, as if his words had been insulting. "Maybe twenty..." he added in an awkward effort to sound reassuring. Judging from the expression on his brother's face, his attempt had failed marvellously.

It pained Donatello to watch Leonardo look at Raphael with such a dreadful and frightened expression. Leo's face was then overrun with dedicated determination, and he started sprinting even quicker, the fleeting speed of his flight saying more than any mere words. Donatello and Mikey nearly tripped as they tried to keep up the amazing pace. Mikey eventually pushed away from Donatello, willing to risk the feverish race on his own. Even with his injured foot, he faired this devilish sprint better unaided. Chances were that Mikey wouldn't be able to walk on his foot at all tomorrow, not after all this... but tomorrow had never before seemed so far away, so unattainable, and so insignificant.

No more words were uttered during their hurried trip home. The gruelling pace didn't allow anything to be released from their throats, other than the raw rasping of their struggled breathing. Donatello was amazed by the fluid grace Leonardo managed to adopt while carrying the burdensome weight of Raphael.

They made it home in record time. At least, Donatello thought they did, he couldn't actually tell for certain. Michaelangelo was the first to lunge at the hidden latch that blocked the entrance to the lair. He all but threw himself onto the ground, his knees scuffing roughly against

the rugged texture of the sewers. He carelessly tossed the latch aside, allowing it to rattle and echo loudly throughout the underground tunnels. A gentle glow from the well-lit lair below enveloped Michaelango's head, and dramatically blanketed his silhouette. His face looked up as his brothers, waiting for them to once again take the lead.

Donatello turned to Leonardo and spoke, "How about I..." He tried to offer his help in lowering Raph down into their home. However, his brother swept past him, and before Donatello could even complete a sentence, Leo disappeared down the hatch. Leonardo's movements were as fluid and graceful as ever. He was completely unhindered by the heavy load in his arms. Donatello merely shrugged to Mikey, and quickly followed suit. He wasn't as eloquent as his brother, even though his arms were free, and Mikey managed to land even more heavily after them both.

It was an amazing feeling to be back home. The lair was a beautiful sight for sore eyes. It was an old and abandoned subway station, complete with antique box cars that had been converted into bedrooms, and an impressive amount of living space. Yet, the real beauty laid not in the lair's impressive size, nor it's luxurious comforts. It was in Donatello's emotional attachment, the safety and inviolated shelter that was associated with his home, with his family. Him and his brothers were beaten and exhausted, and Raph hung precariously in the balance between life and death. Yet, now that they were home, nothing seemed as frightening anymore, not as desolate or despairing. A nurturing warmth had embraced Donatello as soon as he had stepped foot onto the familiar cobblestone flooring of his beloved home. It was similar to the priceless comfort of a mother's touch, or a father's protective presence. This was his home, and he felt invincible. Well, almost...

Donatello was even more relieved when he immediately spotted Splinter, who was waiting by the entrance for their arrival. The sensei sat in a meditative pose on the cushionless ground. When Splinter's gaze found it's way to Raphael's wounded body, he didn't react

externally. He didn't cry out or shout his distress. He didn't rush to his son's side, or demand what had happened. His eyes didn't even twitch. His expression hadn't even changed, yet Donatello noticed that his eyes were already sad, his face drooped with tiredness, and his posture tensed with stress. Had their father expected their unsafe return? His sensei never ceased to surprise Donatello.

Pushing such thoughts aside, he followed as Leonardo silently rushed to a small room they had been progressively transformed into a medical laboratory. Leo didn't even switch on the light, as he flew to the flavourless metallic table they used as a cot from the severely wounded, or rather the proficiently bleeding. The sickening sweet scent of disinfectant cleaners mixed with the copper smell of blood invaded Donatello's nostrils as he entered the small chamber. He distractedly flicked on the powerful fluorescent lights. With a loud buzz, the spotlights activated themselves, and all three turtles gasped at the illuminated frame of their brother's battered body. Never before had they seen him in such a sickening shade of green, along the numerous reddening bruises and lacerations covering the extent of his body. His bloodied shoulder was caked with dried brown blood, as fresh scarlet streams relentlessly leaked through his makeshift bandages. Donnie heard Mikey's soft whimper, Leonardo's increased rate of shocked breathing, and Master Splinter's heartbroken sigh.

Donatello blinked rapidly to release himself from the spellbinding anguish inspired by the vision of their hurt brother. Dizzy and flustered with hysterical distress, Donatello felt himself run to the room's small sink and thoroughly wash his hands. He even heard himself shouting some sort of instructions, while he grabbed a few carefully selected supplies from a nearby shelf. As his body moved and his voice dictated orders, he felt strangely detached, as if he were a passive bystander observing his own life. It was a most disturbing sensation, his thoughts racing frantically while his body independently knew exactly how to operate...

Once Donatello had collected the appropriate medical supplies, he resisted the urge to hesitate. He could feel *them* burning into the back of his skull. No matter how many times Donatello faced medical emergencies, he could never get used to this daunting feeling. He gathered his courage, then turned around to face *them* : three sets of hopeful and helpless eyes, all staring expectantly in his direction, completely and utterly reliant on *him* to save them all from the ever-creeping darkness and despair. It was all up to Donatello, to save Raphael. To save them all. *Oh god...*

On shaky legs, he stepped up to Raphael's side. He heard himself give out more orders while he spilled the supplies he had been holding onto a tray located by Raph's pale and lifeless head. Was he still alive? He couldn't tell, how was he going to know... a heart monitor, didn't he have a self-made heart monitor? Had he already asked someone to fetch it for him? Donatello's hands were already cutting away the sticky and soaked bandages from Raph's shoulder. The blood still flowed freely, but it was definitely tapering... That was not a good sign, definitely not a good sign. *Oh god...*

Just breathe, a calming voice inside his head intoned soothingly.

The voice had no effect.

Donnie's thoughts became panicked and his shouts to his brothers became louder and more insistent. It was the oddest phenomena, no sooner had he finished voicing an order to his family, did he completely forget the words he had just uttered. He couldn't retain anything, yet he somehow managed to continue with his lifesaving efforts. In a way, a part of him had everything under control, while another part realised that he was loosing himself... Donatello could feel himself tumbling into uselessness.

He discarded the shredded remains of the shoulder's bandages, and his hands worked their way into the wound itself. To his horror, he found that he was shaking. No, he had to subdue his tremors, else he would do more harm than good! Yet, he couldn't. He gasped in a frenzy of overpowering hopelessness. *Oh god...*

A small click echoed in the chamber, and although the sound was subtle, it was strange enough to call Donatello's attention. His head snapped behind him to locate the source of the mysterious noise. He saw Leonardo's hand leaving the "play" button from a stereo system mounted onto the wall. Instantly, Donatello's ears were serenaded by the symphonic melodies of a trilling stringed orchestra. How had Leonardo known to do that? Had he told him?

Donatello looked around him quickly. Mikey stood by with fresh towels and bandages, and Master splinter held a bowl of water. Someone had already attached the receptors of his home-brewed heart monitor onto Raphael's chest, and it's uneven bleeps signified that his brother was still alive. Greatly distressed and barely clinging onto life, but alive nonetheless. On a tray within Donatello's reach, there were supplies that included a specially designed needle accompanied with biodegradable thread. One of his hands now held gauze soaked with disinfectant, and he was currently cleaning Raphael's major injury. It would appear that Donatello *did* have everything control. As he focused back on Raph's wounds, he saw that he was no longer trembling. His thoughts were finally focused and confident, for the first time since finding Raph broken on the battlefield. No, since Raphael had called him on his Shell Cell, then hung up on him with his cryptic farewell, leaving Donatello to track his signal...

No, that wasn't quite true. Hadn't Donatello been focused the entire night? Hadn't he been in complete control? He had found Raphael, thanks to his marvellous understanding of electronics. Donatello had bandaged Raphael, he had kept him conscious for as long as possible, and now he was mending his brother's wounds. He wasn't a licensed doctor, nor was he a graduated engineer, but he was the closest thing to civilisation his family had. Donatello provided heat in the winter, warmth in their water, cold preservation in their fridge... He was more than a simple handy man or Mr Fix-It. He was the only entity that could ever supply his family with "essential services". He was their hospital, their family doctor, their electrician, their mechanic...

Donatello didn't want to think about where his family would be without him. They needed him, and not only because he was able to bring a piece of civilisation to their outcast doorstep. Sure, Donatello's thoughts were reeling, but that was only a very small part of his mind... but he had actually been extremely level-headed all night, logical, cool and smooth. His quick actions and thinking tonight surely saved Michaalangelo, safely navigated them out of the lake, and kept Raphael alive.

Was this what Splinter meant when he had called them all "gifts to each other" earlier? He hadn't before realised what a delicate balance his family maintained. Each of them had their own valuable skills, talents and characteristics... They complimented each other so well, each and every one of them playing a key role in their mutual survival...

Survival. Donatello could reflect on his family matters at a later date, all that mattered now was survival. Raphael's survival, to be exact. Yes, it was all in Donatello's hands now. He accepted the responsibilities that came with his "brainiac" talents, he welcomed them lovingly with open arms. Tonight, he was their medic, and he could handle himself as such.

Breathe, that mercifully soothing voice inside his head reminded him. Donatello slowed his breaths into deep and regulated movements, as he worked expertly in disinfecting and repairing his brother's broken flesh. He allowed himself a brief look at his brother's face while he reached for a new item from the metallic tray. Seeing his brother's mouth sagging open, that voice in his head repeated itself, although this time it's message was more of a hopeful plea.

Just breathe.

To Be Continued...

Further Author's Notes:

The conduits feeding water into the Harlem Meer is based on reality. The Harlem Meer is indeed a lake in Central Park, and it is highly maintained by New York City. The conduit I described was my own invention, based on the "water shed" system that delivers tap water into the lake. Guess what, people can also go fishing in the Harlem Meer! I thought that was interesting, considering it's in the heart of New York city, the Big Apple... It's a little hard to picture the stereotypical New Yorker taking a nice relaxing fishing trip to the Harlem Meer... but that's just stereotypes for you!

Also, turtles hold their breath underwater by slowing down their metabolism and circulation. (that's why Donnie was worried about their stress-levels underwater).

Notes to the Reviewers:

Mikaela's Spade:

Glad you like my portrayal of Mikey, lots of ppl did! that makes me so very pleased, for I took great care and deliberation on making that scene just right. This chapter was a little different, no fighting, but still suspenseful (hopefully). They kept swimming, though! Thanks for dropping by!

Lunar-ninja:

hehe. "The Fool on the Hill" is a Beatles song, and the music video has a silly depiction of the fool on the hill, with silly dancing, **really** silly dancing, done by Paul McCartney himself. The end. Oh wait, you told me not to elaborate... sorry! oh well... from now on, I'll just do a happy dance instead, 'kay? Thanks for the review!

Linz:

Hey, thanks for the email. Here's the promised update! yay, update! i guess you gotta be patient in the summertime, for that's when authors update the least. It just... happens. No time. Sorry. But, I loved that you emailed me! That was awesome, and I think it helped

me to finally release this update... so, thanks lots, for everything! I'm glad you loved chapter five, and that you are so enthusiastic about this story. It's a lot of fun and excitement for me, I can tell you! thanks again!

Chibi Rose Angel:

Yeah, I love the angst and suspense, I love cliff-hangers too, even though I complain heavily to all the authors who put us through them... cliff-hangers are the best way to end a chapter! One of these days, I will torture the readers by ending a story on a cliff-hanger.. mua ha ha, I've always wanted to do that. I can deliver the goods, eh? well, if you think that of me, I better work hard to live up to that standard! I'm glad you and Sassy think my style draws in readers and leave them begging for more... actually, that's what i try to do when I perform (being a performing artist, that is) so I'm not surprised it comes through in my writing.

Hmm, you make a good point about focusing on the brotherly and family aspect of the TMNT. I think that's important.

The only TMNT games I've played are for the original nintendo system, but boy did I play them, I played them a lot! I should buy the one for the gamecube.

You are very right: the TMNT addicts are the best! Everyone here is wonderful, it's great! I love it! I also think we'll get on great! Thank you so very much for your encouragement!

captkablooey:

Hehe, Pulp Fiction? I think the drug use and sex puts that movie in a very different category... Yeah, all the turtles showed up. They all had to, this is my first TMNT fic, silly!

kaya lizzie:

Yeah, it's going to take a while for poor Raphy to be in tiptop shape... if I write a sequel, I'll probably but him in physical therapy and everything, hehe! Yeah, water, turtles... it seemed like a logical thing to do. I have to admit, even I didn't know how they would escape at first... it took a long time to come to that conclusion.

Buslady Of SoCal:

Okay, okay! I'm sorry I said it sucked! I shall never imply that anything sucks every again! Oh, and your stuff doesn't suck either! This is a suck-free zone! oh geeze, blood pressure pills? Ok, you aren't allowed to read anymore of my stories until you make sure you've taken your pills! I don't want you to die, nor do I want your death on my hands! So, take it easy, and stuff, please!

Ted: Yeah, you are definitely right, it's really intense, too intense. I did I lot of battle scenes, it was hard to write all of that at once. I did have chapters that broke up the fighting, but I couldn't get it to fit chronologically into my story, and I didn't want to spoil any surprises... so I left it as it is, but I appreciate the suggesting, and will be keeping that in mind when I write in the future! Thanks a lot!

Melodist:

Welcome back, I'm glad you liked my rendition of Raphy... considering how good you are with Raph, that means a lot! Haha, yeah, I beat up Raph a lot. And, I must admit, I enjoyed doing it... -(guilty look)-... Donnie and Raph's conversation chocked you up? Awww, that's so sweet -(hug)-! I tried to make it touching, looks like I succeeded. I also chocked up when I read the last chapter in your misadventures story, that was incredible! Yeah, I love angst. I love writing it. That, and action. I save comical scenes to those who do it best (like yourself, you're a pretty funny person! I don't know anyone else who can combine angst and comedy so well like you!)

well, moving on... HAH, yes, it's just like Raph to be stubborn! Still, that was pretty bad timing on his part, bothering Leo when he's trying to fight off the foot soldiers. -(kicks Raph as well)- Hahaha, I'm sorry

about all the cliffhangers... actually, I'm not. Sorry, but cliffhangers are my thing. hehe. I love your reviews, they were entertaining! Thanks for adding me to your favourites list! yay!

I'm glad you love my descriptive quality, just remember you're very talented yourself, and your style is perfect! Lots of people say they can't write fight scenes, that's okay! there's plenty I can't write as well, just stick to what you do best, with the occasional stabs into the unknown, we're all here to support each other!

Ramica:

Greetings, fellow canadian. Sais are "jittes"? yup, never heard that one before! hehe. I'm glad you found Raph realistic. Raph really needs Leo's calm control to keep him in check, doesn't he? I thought about having Leo call for back-up as soon as his instincts kicked in... but then I would have had to change the story around a lot, hehe. So, I just let Leo assume that he'd have time to call for back-up if he found Raph... (stupid thing to do, eh?). when he finally found Raph, he didn't have a chance to call... which I hope added more to the suspense, not knowing who was coming to Raph's aid, and such. But, you are right, Leo should have called for back-up, and I think he's learned his lesson, and so have I. Next time, I'll definitely work that into the story. (I was wondering if anyone else would pick up on that, it's cool that you did! nice job) Thanks for your input, and your compliments. Hope you drop by for the rest of the story, as well!

The REAL Cheese Monkey:

How long can a mutant turtle hold his breath underwater? I actually did the scientific research into turtles to see -how- they hold their breath... even though they are fictional characters... who's biology makes no damn sense... I still did the research. also, if the research dictated that Raph shouldn't have survived, then he wasn't going to. I came close to killing him off in this chapter. But, he survived!... for now. mua ha ha ha!

Shadowflame611:

Yeah, I'm sorry I said it sucked, I feel bad for saying that now! hehe. Next time, if anything ever sucks, I'll rely on you good people to tell me. Hopefully, that will never be the case. Thanks so much for you thoughtful reviews! Yeah, Leo and Raph would have totally been goners if their bros hadn't made it! that was part of the evil suspense of the story (and also why I didn't let Leo call for help, mua ha ha!)

Uhh, wait a second... did you just say "hiz-ouse"? ...now I'm frightened. -(backs away slowly)-

BlueRaven:

Hi, welcome back to the world of reviewing! hehe, just joking, I forget to review all the time! Especially when there are many exciting stories to catch up on! It's all good, I'm happy to know you've been following the story, that's the important part. thanks!

Sassyblondexoxo:

Sassy! Hi! Thanks for your email, and thanks for telling Mickis to check out my story! I'm so touched! You are such a cool person, thanks so much! Now that I finally updated my story, I'm gonna finally do what I've been meaning to do, and review your older work (that aren't as old to me, being relatively new here!) So, keep your eyes open for that! Remember, you are so talented, you don't need to doubt yourself -ever-. I'm glad you think I'm a great battle scene writer, but you are as well, don't let other works intimidate you. If we all did that, no one would -ever- write -anything-, hehe. Also, I'd love you even more if you updated Heat ... Hehe, I have you hooked for life with my writing? hehe, you have me hooked too! Well, sorry it took so long to update, that's the summer season for ya! Just wait till it gets colder out, and when people stop visiting my house EVERY FREAKIN' DAY! There will be so many more stories for all of us to write and love! It's very reassuring to know everyone likes the way I depicted Mikey, not to mention that I've managed tokeep everyone in-character... which is getting harder, now that the seriousness is starting to dawn more and more on the turtles (in the story). I'll just keep doing my best! Thanks for your reviews!

EagleFox:

Hi, EagleFox, nice to meet you, and even better to see new names on my review list. It means a lot when ppl let me know they've dropped by and read my story! It makes me very happy indeed to hear that you enjoy my fight scenes! Maybe I'll see you drop by again and leave another review sometime, that would make my day!

eldarsevenstar:

hehe, I love your reviews, they are greatly entertaining! Haha, so did you get some time off from your place of work? You're my kind of person, reading fanfiction at work... very nice! Yeah, Leo is one butt-kicking super ninja! He's great, and my favourite stories are fics that involve both him and Raph. Thanks for another awesome review that makes me laugh whenever I read it! See you soon, I hope!

Pi90katana:

Ahh, you love my blue flame? that's great, I always feel obliged to come up with special ways of describing Leo's fighting and mental discipline, cuz he's so talented... he's a natural, a really gifted ninja, far beyond his years. ...me? a mentor? I'm so touched! thank you for your beautiful sentiments! It's very true, so many of you are inspirations! You are too, with the way you captivated mental instability in your story "suicide"! We all become mentors to each other, and it's amazing how fan fiction improves our writing tremendously. It's simply amazing, and powerful! Alright, you wanna know how many wounds Leo has suffered? Alrighty, here's Leo's wound count:

1 - cut on his left arm (a "graze")

2 - his left side was clubbed, no life-threatening injuries, but we'll see how wounded his innards are in the following chapters

3 - his right thigh was cut by a katana

That's all I have in my notations... hmm, -only- three injuries? did I miss something myself? I'm going to have to invent a couple more wounds...

Hehe, I have a small obsession with wounded protagonists... I, myself, thoroughly enjoy seeing my beloved heroes struggle with their mortality. Are you the same way?

Wow, I'm a whole seven years older than you? Gawd, I feel so OLD! also, my birthday is coming up, I'll be 23 within a month! 23! AHHHH!

pacphys:

pacphys! you returned! yay! hehe, I lose track of fics -all the time-. It feels like I'm apologising in half the reviews I leave... No, of course I won't kick you, it's all good. I'm glad you eventually found your way here, though. Thanks for leaving a review for all the chapters, that's so generous and thoughtful! Besides, there is an advantage in coming in late... you missed a lot of cliffhangers! That's always nice, you got to read a bunch of chapters one after the other.

Hehe, you knew that "silent mode" comment was coming! Hey, that's something that always bothered me... well, everything technology-related in cartoons bothers me, as if I expect cartoon physics and science to be realistic... you'd think the turtles would have figured out a way to properly deal with communicators, they -are- ninjas, they -do- need to practice the art of invisibility, geeze! Hmm, you know what? I don't think Raph would like the vibrator mode very much, haha! Let's face it, no matter how hard Donnie tries, he'll never be able to build a Raph-friendly communicator... or a Raph-proof ANYTHING. Haha, Double As and fuses... by any chance, are you like me, dissecting technology in cartoons? (or at least in fan fics?) hehe! You've got a good point, though. I feel sorry for Donnie, considering how rough his brothers are with his carefully-crafted electronics. Those aren't toys, you know, Raph!

OMG you added me to your C2! thankyouthankyou! -(gasps)- my story is now "valued as a gem", that's beautiful! THANK YOU!

oh right, one more thing: Lunar-ninja informs me (actually, it was more of a threat...) that you have a rule that clearly states "no killing good guys"...? How does this rule work, again? mua ha ha ha!

jigsaws231:

Hi again, glad to know you liked the chapter, and that you are keeping up with the story! I'm trying to keep up the details, thanks!

Mickis:

Hi! nice to see another reviewer! I've read your stuff, and I'm impressed! Aww, Sassy told you about me? What a sweetheart! So, to answer your first question, Leo is one of my favourites, him and Raphael. I tried really hard to get into his head... The turtles are so real for me, in my mind. I actually don't related as much with Leo as I do with Raph and Donnie... but that doesn't help me write Donnie at all, oh well. I think I revere Leo... I am in awe of him. Okay, to answer your next question: yes, all of them will be reflecting upon Splinter's words. It helps me to get inside all their heads, so that I may be able to write more TMNT fan fics. You also might notice, by now, that Raph hasn't yet done adequate reflection upon how he is a gift... "not dying" is hardly the point Splinter was trying to make! hehe.

Thanks for coming back and leaving more reviews, btw! I think it's awesome that you are in Sweden, I've been meaning to visit there for a long time, and I've heard great things about it! great things! Hehe, I'm sorry my cliffhangers forced you to read instead of sleep... I guess that's what I do best. Yeah, those lines were supposed to be funny, well, as funny as a person like me can make scenes. I was -hoping- for a little moment of relief in between all the stressful scenes... that break didn't last long, though. I feel bad for Donnie too, after that phone call. I know from experience, that's very UNCOOL! In fact, Donnie gave him a tiny lecture when he finally met up with Raph... you go, Donnie! Hah, yeah, you have it right, I -love- action! And suspense, and excitement, and all that jazz. You're lucky you came when you did, with chapter 5 already released, that way you didn't have to suffer from all those bad cliffhangers, and you didn't

get any cliffhanger nightmares, hehe. There may be one more really bad cliffhanger before this story ends... but the worst ones are done with! I promise, this story will be complete soon, and I could never drop a story, so rest assured that there will -always- be an update!

Ugh, that was a LOT of reviews, wow! thanks everyone! take care, see ya soon!

Relentless

Disclaimer: How many times do I have to say it... I don't own the teenage mutant ninja turtles. This story is for non-profit. I have no money!

The Greatest Gifts

Chapter 7: Relentless

Michaelangelo felt like a fifth wheel. He was as useful as a squeaking... wobbling... and cracked fifth wheel. He was just as annoying, too. He felt as though he was getting in everyone's way, and he could tell that his incessant chat was a vexing distraction, yet he was helpless to stop himself. It was a frustrating predicament. He probably needed a good slap to knock him out of his babbling stupor, but everyone was far too busy to provide him with the sobering smack he required. Michaelangelo wasn't even sure *what* he was rambling on about, nor how long he had been standing there awkwardly while the rest of his family was productive. All he could manage was to sputter the occasional random sentence, while he watched everyone with awe-filled eyes, and his heart quickly beat its terrified rhythm.

Donatello was finished sewing-up and bandaging Raphael's wounds, and was currently foraging for medical supplies and medicines that might prove useful. He had performed spectacularly tonight, and Mikey wondered if Donnie realised what a talented surgeon he had become. His self-taught genius was nothing short than miraculous.

Master Splinter was cleaning and dressing Leonardo's bleeding wounds, now that Raphael's more pressing injuries had been dealt with properly. Mikey embraced the sight of father. The mere sight of the sensei's flickering whiskers as he concentrated filled Mikey's

heart with a fullness that he so desperately sought this evening. It easily combated the relentless feelings of hopelessness and helplessness. Mikey couldn't imagine his life without Splinter... He didn't want to imagine. He refused to. Expelling such thoughts from his mind, he let his gaze drift away from his father's hunched-over figure.

Leonardo only had eyes for their unconscious brother, as he whispered words that could be heard by no one, with the possible exception of Raphael... Even though his sensei was working on his arm, Leonardo was oblivious to the rodent's efforts, as he absorbed himself in patting Raphael's clammy brow with a cloth. He always became so protective of Raph when he was injured...

Everyone's movements were so filled with purpose, and their usefulness almost made Michaelangelo feel almost envious. Michaelangelo wished Donatello still needed his help, and that he hadn't stopped delegating orders for everyone to follow. He had been fine when someone else had dictated his actions, feeling like he was making a valuable contribution. It had given tremendous relief from the foreboding prognostic that was haunting his mind.

Now that Donnie was no longer telling him what to do, Mikey didn't know what to do with himself. Every time he heard that cursed heart monitor bleep irregularly, so disturbing to the ears like a tap dancer without any sense of rhythm, Mikey blurted out random sentences in an effort to overpower it. Finally, a fed-up Donatello twirled around quickly in his spot, his body movements etched with irritation. He managed to hide his annoyance well from his facial expression, staring at Mikey as he would a mystery or phenomenon. Judging from Donnie's face, the enigma that was Michaelangelo was insolvable.

Before Donatello even opened his mouth, Mikey knew what his brother was going to say. He was getting kicked out of the medical lab. "Mikey," Donatello said in an exhausted tone, while a strange wrinkle appeared on his brow, almost as if he was concerned, "you

need to go sit down in the kitchen, and put ice on your swollen ankle. You need do that right now."

Mikey wasn't offended that Donatello was booting him out of the room. In fact, he was rather relieved. Sure, Donatello wasn't blatantly kicking him out, he was only strongly suggesting that Michaelangelo visit the kitchen... but Mikey wasn't stupid. He knew he had been officially kicked out of the medical lab.

Without a second though, Michaelangelo silently stole out of the room and wandered into their cheerfully-painted kitchen. Away from that cruel heart monitor which seemed to delight in broadcasting Raphael's frail condition. He never did like that heart monitor much, anyway, it always seemed quite arrogant and inconsiderate of other people's feelings...

Mikey's thoughts remained with his wounded brother. He opened the freezer to grab some ice for himself... and reached for the banana-fudge ice cream instead. Then he opened the fridge, and removed the leftover pizza. And the strawberry cheesecake. And the chocolate milk. And a jar of pickles. In times like these, most people lost their appetites, allowing stress to bore into them with scorching nausea. Not Mikey. No, times like these left him feeling famished, giving him irresistible urges to pillage the fridge, freezer and cupboards. Some said Mikey was obsessed with food... but he was just a normal teenager with a normal healthy appetite.

Okay, perhaps Mikey *was* obsessed with food. It was his good friend, always helping him take his mind off his worries.

As an afterthought, Michaelangelo finally grabbed a small bag of ice from the freezer. Only after depositing his precious snacks onto the kitchen table, of course. He limped to the nearest chair, and flopped down with a weary sigh. He sluggishly brought his hurt foot onto an adjacent stool, then carelessly dropped the ice pack onto his ankle... Big mistake. The impact jolted his pain, which soared up his leg with such fiery fervor that the shocked turtle nearly fell out of his chair. He let out a high-pitched girlish squeal. He would have been

embarrassed, if his mind hadn't been far too occupied. Or if his ankle hadn't been throbbing in startling agony. Or if Mikey hadn't already screamed like a girl so many times, that his brothers were tired of mocking him.

Slowly the pain dissipated, leaving Michaelangelo with his stupidity. Feeling very much like an idiot, he started to help himself to the icy tub of banana-fudge ecstasy sitting in front of him. The sultry chocolate and smooth fruit flavour almost offered him a blissful escape from the stresses of the present. Almost.

Mikey didn't hear the soft patter of his sensei's feet and walking stick until Splinter was practically breathing down his neck. Looking up with a generous spoonful of ice cream in his mouth, he gave his father his largest puppy-eyed and innocent expression, letting the utensil hang immobile from his mouth. Splinter sighed, muttered something about "kids", then turned to the cupboard that held his abundant supply of herbs and teas.

"Michaelangelo..." he began patiently, then paused as he turned around to face the eating turtle with a kind face. "My son," he continued gently, "please aid me with the preparation of these herbs..."

The gorging turtle glanced down at his injured foot, then looked up incredulously at his sensei, his expressive eyes hurt that his father would make him do anything with a gimp leg. The wise rodent nearly smiled in amusement, then raised his hands to bring attention to the items he held. A marbled stone mortar and pestle sat regally in one of Splinter's furry hands, beautifully toned in swirling black and radiant pearl. Splinter's other hand held a bag of exotic seeds, quite ugly and odd in comparison. In fact, it took a moment for the young turtle to realise that they were in fact seed. The rusty-coloured seeds were irregular in shape, completely unsymmetrical with jutting angles that lacked any form or pattern. Michaelangelo had done a double take; for a moment, he had thought he was looking at a bag of badly-formed and horribly stained teeth.

Michaelangelo grudgingly pushed his mountainous collection of snacks aside and cleared a bit of room on the table. Naturally, he kept the food well within his grasp. The turtle voiced no complaint; despite his body language, he was actually eager to help out, especially if Splinter's herbal remedies would aid in Raph's recovery.

Mikey worked hard to crush those weird seeds, whose name he was unable to retain. As soon as Splinter had uttered the word *kampo* , the turtle's ears had immediately initiated defensive protocols, enabling him to ignore serious and educational lectures. *Kampo* was some sort of Japanese herbal remedy... thingy... Mikey wasn't sure, nor did he care. As much as he respected his sensei, he simply didn't understand any of these herbal lessons. They only herbs he cared about were the ones that flavoured his food.

And so Mikey worked hard with the mortar and pestle, nodding occasionally as he pretended to listen to Splinter. He worked hard and adopted the pose of an attentive son... until he watched in horror as pepperoni smudged with solidified cheese slipped off his cold pizza, and landed onto the crushed seeds. Mikey's throat released a strangled cry, and his eyes slowly raised themselves to look up at his sensei, who's lecture had stopped abruptly. Although Mikey felt incredibly guilty, and he was internally cringing with dread, his body was outwardly betraying him, as it often did. He was the only one of his brothers who couldn't keep a smile off his face when he was accused of lying, even if he was innocently telling the truth. He couldn't help it, for some reason, his body would deal with the stress of getting in trouble... by smiling.

Michaelangelo did his best to wipe that horrible grin off his face, as the corners of his mouth twitched uncontrollably with involuntary reflex. *Mind over matter! Mind over matter!* he repeated desperately in his thoughts, and he bit the insides of his cheeks until his teeth came close to breaking skin. It was all to no avail. A goofy grin sneaked onto his facial features, though his bashful eyes were wide with guilt. He opened his mouth and tried to apologise, but the stern aura radiating from his sensei burned away his words before they

could spill from his mouth. His jaw hung open, no sound escaping, his lips unmoving. He felt himself grow smaller under his father's silent disappointment, which plunged itself into his guilt-ridden mind more effectively then any lecture or punishment. After an incredibly awkward moment, Michaelangelo finally found the willpower to move his tongue and lips. He started to form the words of an eloquent apology, one of many that he had rehearsed in front of his mirror, a powerful arsenal that he saved for times like these... Yet, no sooner had his lips formed the first word of his recital, did Splinter's piercing eyes grind into him with fierce intensity. Instead of regurgitating his carefully composed words, Mikey uttered in a very sheepish voice, "... Oops."

Perhaps it was the conditioned fear of getting whacked by Splinter's walking stick that inspired such dread in Michaelangelo, that he forgot the urgent overtones of tonight's disastor. Had he really expected Splinter to strike him down with vengeance, while his brother lay dying in the medical lab? Yes. Michaelangelo really had been expecting such a reaction. Yet, Splinter *was* his father, and no matter how strict he was with his disciplinary actions, he always chose the most appropriate course of action. That is why the elderly rat merely sighed in frustration, muttering something about "kids", then followed by a phrase that suspiciously sounded like "I'm getting too old for this."

"Michaelangelo..." his voice sounded so fatigued, that the guilty turtle suddenly felt even worse. "My dear son," Splinter addressed tenderly, with words wove with patience and understanding that immediately alleviated Michaelangelo's guilt. "It would be wise to check with Donatello; your wounds need to be dressed."

Mikey managed to mercifully tear away from his father's entrapping gaze. He looked down at the swollen ankle blanketed with melting ice, and saw small rivulets of blood entwining with the wooden grain of the kitchen stool. *Oops,* Mikey thought with embarrassment. A small part of him was offended that he had defiled the very sanctity of his beloved kitchen. He nodded quickly, not daring to look back up

at Splinter, for fear that he was captured again by his acute stare. The ninjitsu master had much power over his sons, his body pulsated with an intimidating presence, and his eyes were a daunting foe to reckon with. They looked right through you, past any pretenses or lies, delving deep into your soul. Nothing could ever be hidden from those omnipotent eyes.

Hence why Michaelangelo scurried quickly from the kitchen without risking another look at his father. He carelessly left the bag of ice dripping condensation, and his small feast lay neglected on the table. He cared not for his wounded ankle as he jogged and hopped out of the room until he was safely out of sight. It all happened so fast, that it took a moment before it struck Mikey that he had just been politely "exiled" from the kitchen by a very diplomatic Splinter.

His father was good. Very good.

He reflected upon his father's awesome and admirable powers, which he revered like a super hero, until he reached the closed door of the medical lab. He froze and stared at the door, unable to move. He wanted nothing else than to step inside and eagerly discover what awaited for him, yet at the same time he wanted to turn on his heels and desperately run away. He struggled with his inner-conflict, until he finally came to a comforting conclusion. The part of him that was afraid of what he would find was greatly overpowered by his faith in Donatello.

Mikey hoped that his brothers wouldn't mind him returning back to the medical lab. It wasn't his fault he babbled and rambled when he was nervous. He hadn't had any food at the time to keep his mouth from spilling an endless cascade of nonsensical sentences. He was doing much better now, though. They had to forgive him. He was too cute and lovable.

Michaelangelo confidently peaked his head into the medical lab, letting his beak push the unlatched door enough to peek inside. Through the crack of the door, he could see Raph's pale and battered body. He was softly covered in a mellow blanket that was

pulled up to his chest, with his arms draped limply on top. His bandages were fresh, and Mikey could see bits of crimson asserting themselves as blood trickled through his stitches. Fresh bruises flushed his face and arms, deep reds with bluish hues contrasting against a shade of grassy green that was significantly lighter than usual. His non-bandaged shoulder looked oddly swollen, and was already blackening with splashes of purples and navy blemishes. Michaelangelo couldn't withstand to look at his brother any longer, and found himself clenching his eyes tightly.

A few calming breaths later, he found the nerve to reopen his eyes, but he avoided shifting his gaze to Raph's pathetic form.

Michaelangelo bit his lip as he nudged his head further through the door. Donatello was pacing around in the room, keeping himself busy with continuous activities. Raphael was still hooked up to a small heart monitor, and it's repetitive beeps assured them all that he was still alive. The rhythm of his stubborn heart was already sounding better, he was relieved to hear. Mikey winced when he recalled the sound of Raph's weak heartbeats when Donatello had first hooked it up... Michaelangelo shook the thought out his head, and watched Donatello occupy himself with mobility. He looked underneath Raph's eyelids, then frowned as he notated his discovery onto a nearby clipboard. Donatello then marched over to a shelf decorated with various bottles of pills and liquids. He hesitantly poked around, as if struggling to choose the right drug. Unable to make a decision, Donatello hung his head in frustration, and pinched his sinuses as he tried to subdue a migraine. Michaelangelo felt really bad for his brother. Their physiology was alien and exotic, still a scientific mystery. If Donatello wanted to use a strong drug or powerful medicine, he wouldn't know if their bodies would react negatively until it was too late. They hardly ever used painkillers and anesthetics for that reason.

Mikey sadly turned his eyes away from his stressed-out brother, and looked at Leonardo, who still sat vigilantly at Raphael's side. His hand was idly stroking their brother's upper arm, while a distant and

melancholic expression cloaked his face. His slumped shoulders and depleted energy levels depicted a profound depression, one that Leonardo always fell into when Raph got injured. No doubt he was blaming himself for Raphael's condition, and regretting every harsh word him and Raph had spoken earlier today. That turtle had more self-criticism, guilt-trips and worry bottled-up inside him than the rest of them combined.

It looked like Mikey had come back just in time, because all three of his brothers were in a sorry shape.

As he opened the door further and stepped into the room, Donatello whirled on his feet to see who approached. Mikey was relieved when he wasn't demanded to leave again, but his brother looked so high-strung that he expected him to explode at any moment. Donatello opened his mouth as if to greet him, but instead settled on a short nod of his head.

Leonardo looked up and gave Michaelangelo a hopeful look, his posture straightening with a fleeting burst of optimism, as if the orange-clad turtle brought the solution to his problems. The moment quickly passed, and with a quiet sigh, Leonardo deflated into his despondent slump. He once again phased out of reality, returning to his detached staring.

Mikey stood for a moment, at a complete loss with what to do with himself. He had forgotten why Splinter had sent him here in the first place, and racked his mind in a arduous effort to recall... Even as he started to stand on one leg to take the strain off his injured ankle, he still couldn't remember.

Donatello instantly grabbed two small stools that were tucked away in the corner, and deposited them in front of Mikey. "Sit," he said quickly in a restless tone. Mikey complied immediately, and even though he was pretty sure Donnie's tone of voice wasn't directed at himself, the words still struck him hard. He wasn't usually so easily hurt, but today everyone was sensitive and emotional. Heck, Leo

looked like he could start crying at any moment, except he was so drained that he lacked the energy.

Donatello sunk to the ground so quickly, that Mikey was surprised his knees didn't hit the concrete floor with a hard smack. He carefully lifted Mikey's hurt leg, and lowered it onto the second stool so delicately that Michaelangelo couldn't feel it's metallic surface through his pain. Donatello looked the ankle over quickly without making contact, then shook his head disappointingly. It was as if Mikey's ankle had been disobeying Donatello's direct orders, and the orange-clad turtle nearly apologised on behalf of his swollen appendage. Doctor Donatello then jumped back to his feet, his movements jerky and quick from the anxiety fueling his body. He grabbed a handful of supplies, including bandages and disinfectant.

As Donatello liberally applied peroxide onto gauze, he searched Michaelangelo's face. After a heavy moment passed between them both, where the weight of their unspoken words fidgeted uncomfortably in the air, Donnie finally spoke. "You look better, Mikey," he said softly. The anxiety that had previously strained Donatello's voice had been replaced with his usual delicate quality. "I was getting worried for a while, you were becoming very pale... I think you were falling into psychological shock, but you seem to be doing much better."

Shock? Was that why Donnie had asked him to leave? Because he was falling victim to shock? Boy, Mikey felt stupid... unless, of course, Donnie was just saying these things to make him feel better.

Michaelangelo didn't have time to reflect on the matter much further, for Donatello had suddenly started applying the peroxide onto the numerous cuts and scratches that criss-crossed around the violet swells of his ankle. He squealed and tried to protectively yank his leg away, but Donatello's free hand reflexively clamped down on his leg to keep it immobile. Just as Donnie had done so when he saved Mikey's life earlier, underwater... The orange-clad turtle pursed his lips together stubbornly, and tried to tough out the pain. He did *owe*

Donnie his life, after all... He made a mental note to be nicer to Donatello.

Donatello continued talking as if nothing had happened, as he expertly continued to distract Mikey from the pain of his ankle. "Hey, Mikey, do you think there's room in the fridge for a few pints of blood?"

Okay, maybe he wasn't exactly *expertly* distracting Mikey by choosing a topic about blood... but he did make Mikey forget about his pain. "Huh?..." Mikey responded as his voice trailed off into confusion. He blinked a few times, ensured himself that he had heard Donatello correctly, then continued, "Blood? In the fridge? Dude, I'm pretty sure most social circles *still* consider that taboo..."

Donatello's eyes flickered up to glance at Mikey, looking mildly offended by the implication that what he had just said was odd. He looked back down at Mikey's ankle as he cleaned the scrapes, then continued his train of thought. "No, I mean for medical emergencies." Donnie's voice was again adopting an anxious tone. "The mutagen was too unstable, and combined with our individual physiology..."

Oh no, here we go... Mikey thought unpleasantly to himself. He tuned out Donnie's voice, which unfortunately left him with nothing to distract him from the pain in his ankle. After a minute of wincing, twitching and biting his lip, he found that he was dreading that cursed gauze far too much. He was far too tense, and was actually starting to imagine nasty ways of shredding that malicious piece of cloth until it was hardly recognisable... thoughts in which he derived morbid pleasure. Before he could break out in maniacal laughter, he decided to get a grip on his sanity. His choice was simple: focus on the pain in his ankle (and that disinfectant *really burned* , after trekking through the polluted sewers with open wounds), or deal with the mental pain of having to bear through one of Donnie's tangents... After carefully weighing the pros and cons of both options, Michaelangelo finally opted for paying attention to Donatello, even if it usually led to a headache and depressing feelings of intellectual inadequacy.

"...so you can see the complications that would arise from the merger of various strains of mutated blood!" Donnie exclaimed while glancing back up at Michaelangelo for acknowledgment. His eyes were filled with that same fire that was prominent every time he explained his own scientific discovers or endeavours.

Mikey struggled to find a response that would signify that he was actually paying attention, which he hadn't been. He wanted to encourage Donnie, especially since he had pulled Mikey out of a tight spot earlier... "Oh yeah, of course," he responded gravely, then sighed silently in relief when Donatello nodded in response, obviously content that he had gotten his point across. He had mercifully ceased disinfecting the cuts, and was now applying antibiotic ointment.

A small moment of silence passed between them, as Michaelangelo waited expectantly for Donatello to continue with his explanation. When Donatello didn't continue speaking, Mikey was almost overjoyed. His brainiac brother was finished spurting his scientific jargon, and Mikey didn't need to further pretend that he was paying attention. It was a small victory!

Or so he had thought. Unfortunately, Mikey was unnerved by the lack of talking and interaction. He could hear every jarring beep from that annoying heart monitor, the subtle ticks of the clock which seemed to retard even slower, the soft sad sighs that occasionally leaked through Leonardo's listless lips, the cracked rasping of Raphael's laboured breathing... It was too much to bear.

Against his better judgement, Michaelangelo broke the silence. "Err, Donnie? What does that have to do with blood in the fridge?..." he inquired hesitantly. He was pretty sure that Donatello wasn't planning on drinking the blood, so he wasn't *too* afraid of his answer.

Donatello looked up at Mikey in annoyance as he recapped the ointment. He seemed exasperated that Michaelangelo hadn't understood the first time. "So we can give ourselves blood transfusions with our own blood, of course!" Mikey was about ask

why they couldn't just give each other blood as the need arose, instead of having to store it in their precious fridge... but he stopped himself just in time, fearing that Donatello had already explained that while Mikey had been pretending to pay attention.

Donatello sighed as he gently covered the lacerations on Mikey's skin by wrapping the ankle a few times with fresh gauze. "It's impossible to test without the risk of sending our bodies into severe immune reactions..." This time Mikey couldn't hide the blank expression from his face when Donatello glanced up. His brother searched his mind for a few seconds, trying to find a simpler way of expressing his thoughts. "Our blood types aren't compatible." He eventually concluded.

How hard could it have been to say that in the first place? Michaelangelo thought in amazement. He wondered about scientists' striking inability to communicate with normal people, deciding that they spoke a different language.

Donatello finished his work on Mikey's ankle by wrapping it firmly with a tensor bandage, while instructing him to stay off the foot for at least a day, and to treat it like a sprain.

When Leonardo spoke up, it surprised them both. He was being so silent, one could almost forget he was there.

"Donnie, you did everything you could for Raphael," Leo's words were slow and measured, as though he was contemplating the sentence as he spoke it.

"No, I didn't!" Donatello erupted, his words lashing out at an invisible enemy. His eyes narrowed as he turned abruptly to stare at Leonardo, but it was obvious that he carried no malice for his brother. The explosion Mikey had been expecting had finally broken free from Donatello. "I should have been better prepared... I could have made Raph donate blood a month ago, then we could have given him a transfusion..."

"Oh, Donnie..." Leonardo stood up from his seat sluggishly, as though he were ill and decrepit and it took much exertion to accomplish a simple task. "You saved Raphael's life..." he continued as he took small steps toward Donatello. If his purple-banded brother hadn't been too occupied berating himself, he would have noticed the honoured gesture that Leo bestowed upon him by relinquishing his vigil at Raphael's side.

"No, you don't know that!" Donatello continued as he paced angrily. "He's far from out of the clear..." They both seemed to have forgotten Michaelangelo, who sat dumbfounded in the sidelines as he watched his brother approach a breakdown. He wanted to jump up and comfort Donnie, or offer further words of encouragement... but he was rendered speechless. He had never seen Donatello this worked up before. He was the rational one, the level-headed one, the grounding force that kept the *rest* of them sane! It was disconcerting to see him in such a state of self-doubt. Aslo, now that Leonardo had left his post at Raphael's side, Mikey was the closest one in proximity to their ailing brother. He reached out and grabbed Raphael's hand, and watched his brother's shallow breaths as his chest rose and fell so subtly.

"Donatello," Leonardo addressed his brother formally, yet his voice had adopted an even more tender tone. "Listen to me," he implored, his sad eyes reaching out to their distressed brother with concern. "You were amazing tonight. You couldn't have done anything different. Donnie, we're lucky to have you..."

At that last sentence Donatello finally stopped his pacing, and looked at Leonardo with strange wonderment. He finally nodded and managed a weak smile, though his eyes shun with unshed tears, and his posture slumped with extreme exhaustion.

Leonardo smiled and raised his hand to grab a hold of Donatello's shoulder comfortingly, but suddenly grasped his left inside instead. He groaned involuntarily as doubled-over, and his face crunched in pain.

"Leo!" Mikey cried with fresh concern, as Donatello lunged to Leo's side. He tenderly plied the moaning turtle's hand away from the side of his shell, while his other hand helped support Leo's weight. Donatello quickly examined Leonardo's plastron, then quickly shook his head in the same manner he had looked disapprovingly upon Mikey's foot. After a quick argument Mikey's head, he kept himself firmly planted in his seat, instead of jumping to Leo's side as well. Without even noticing, he squeezed Raphael's hand even harder.

"How long has your side been hurting?" Donatello questioned anxiously. Leonardo hesitated before he answered, with a childlike guilt that came naturally with his do-no-wrong attitude. His blushed uncomfortably with greatly apologetic eyes. Donatello looked up at Leonardo's face in surprise. He had expected such a stunt from Raphael, but not Leonardo, the "responsible one".

"Since the lake..." Leonardo admitted reluctantly. His face was no longer shrewd with pain, but was blushing even harder with embarrassment.

"The lake!" Donatello exclaimed scandalously. "You should have mentioned something, we could have..." Donatello trailed off as Leonardo lowered his head in shame.

"Donnie, what's wrong? Is Leo hurt bad?" Michaelangelo spoke up nervously as he fretted over Leonardo's mystery injury. He subconsciously squeezed Raphael's hand ever tighter.

Both brothers turned to look at Michaelangelo in unison. They looked like they *had* forgotten he was in the room. "Leo's going to be just fine," Donatello did his best to quell Mikey's fears, his brown eyes filled with sympathy. This had been a horrendous night, everyone's nerves felt like they had been pulverised in an earthquake, and it was understandable that they would feel afraid. It seemed like fate wasn't finished dealing wild cards this evening, and Michaelangelo prayed that this was the last.

"From what I can tell, Leo's just a little bruised," Donatello continued reassuring as he further inspected Leo's side. Mikey didn't mind the patronising tone Donatello used as he lightly referred to Leonardo's injury, as if he had nothing more than a scraped knee. "I suspect a rib or two may have been bruised, as well..." Michaelangelo interrupted Donnie's explanation with a fearful gasp, and Donatello rushed to alleviate his brother's worries. "It's not as bad as it sounds! It's painful, though, but nothing severe."

Of course, the term *severity* was relative. Compared to Raphael's current life-threatening struggle, Michaelangelo had to agree with Donatello. Though he was still mildly worried, he had to admit that "bruised ribs" didn't sound as serious anymore.

"Leo, I'll have to further examine you in order to be sure, but we should do this in my other lab..." Donatello explained as he tried to lead Leonardo out of the room, but their blue-clad brother stubbornly resisted. He was distressed as he looked at Raphael, as though the thought of leaving his seriously injured brother's side was an unfathomable horror. Leonardo obviously was still willing to ignore his injuries, sacrificing his well-being until Raphael's condition improved further.

"It's okay, Leo," Mikey reassured with a smile so brilliant, that it lit up his face. It was one of Mikey's many talents, the ability to radiate happiness in a comforting manner when depression and sadness stalked his loved ones, no matter how glum he was feeling himself. "Raph will be fine, I'll watch over him."

Leonardo opened his mouth to protest, but Donatello was literally dragging him out of the room. The purple-clad turtle was exhausted and cranky, and his patience was wearing tight. He mimicked Michaelangelo's reassurances as they both disappeared out of the door, heading straight for Donatello's science lab, which could easily be used for medical purposes if the need arose.

Then Michaelangelo was alone. Raphael's strangled breathing magnified in his ears, along with all the other horrible sound effects

brought forth by medical emergencies. Once again, Mikey couldn't bear it, and broke the silence.

"Hi Raphy..." he began hesitantly, the complete lack of confidence falling off his tongue awkwardly as his words tripped over themselves. He cleared his throat loudly and began anew. "Dude..." What did one say to a wounded brother, anyway? He peered closely at Raphael's expression. He had expected him to look peaceful, or restful, or some other relaxed expression that usually accompanied a face that was deeply absorbed in the unconscious realm of oblivion. Yet, Raph's face contained not a trace of any peace, he instead looked strained, haunted, even hunted... and definitely in pain. Perhaps it was Mikey's imagination combined with the fact that Raphael was pale, swollen and beaten... perhaps it was even a trick of the light that made his face seem stretched, made his mouth look like it flicked into a grimace... But from Mikey's point of view, Raphael definitely looked to be in pain. Michaelangelo's heart sunk and his brow furrowed in concern, as he said the only thing that leaped to mind, "Dude... you look like hell."

Not the most eloquent phrase, nor the most wittiest, and Mikey almost cringed when he realised that he had swore, for it was not his style. Yet, the words just came out, unhindered, unheeded... they voiced themselves of their own accord. And it was true. Raphael looked horrible.

With a sad a weary sigh, Michaelangelo continued to talk, though mostly small talk. He spoke about the weather, about Casey's new motorcycle, about April's new HDTV wide screen entertainment centre, the latest episodes of survivor... He didn't pay any mind as to the topic of his one-sided discussion, he just wanted to fill the silence. He also hoped that the sound of his voice found it's way through the black void that filled Raphael's mind. Perhaps through his sickness and comatose affliction, Raphael would be soothed.

After a short while, Mikey could have sworn that Raph's facial expression relaxed slightly... and the orange-clad turtle smiled as he continued his monologue.

Mikey prayed that Raph would pull through. He desperately needed his brother's vigourous presence. He wanted to see Raph's eyes flutter open, smile as he looked at Mikey's concerned eyes, then say: "Why do you look so worried? It's only a flesh wound." Most of all, Michaelangelo just wanted to see Raph smile. It seemed that Raphael didn't smile nearly enough. At least Michaelangelo could take pride in the fact that he made Raph smile more than anyone else. Even if it often was at his own expense.

There was an intoxicating rush derived from the act of making someone smile, or laugh out loud. It was the most pleasant feeling Michaelangelo had ever known, and it was the reason he had grown into the goofy joker that he was today. It's not as though he had decided at a very young age that he would grow up to be the clown of the family. It was far from his life's ambition. He had simply grown addicted to the invigorating satisfaction obtained from the mirth he invoked in others. It had happened so gradually, that he didn't realise it had happened at all, until one morning he awoke to realise that no one ever took him seriously anymore. That either half the time they were laughing with him, and for the other half they were laughing *at* him.

Perhaps he could have set forth from that day on, and tried to grow a serious name for himself. Yet, how could he change so easily? He was stuck in a trap of humour... the self-induced slave labour of being a clown. He was desperately addicted to bringing laughter to his loved ones. He could no more back away from this role then he could let them down. He just couldn't change.

After a while, he had realised that as frustrating as it sometimes was, he didn't want to change. His life could be a lot worse.

In fact, he was finally seeing how beautiful the role of a clown actually was. He didn't realise what a miracle it was to make Raphael laugh full-heartedly, when only moments before he could see a soul-tearing darkness shrouding the red-banded turtle's eyes. Nor did he appreciate the difficulty of finding ways to keep Raphael from venturing outdoors for an evening of solitude, and instead

convincing him to watch zombie movies all night with his brothers. Mikey could accomplish all these tasks relatively easily.

He knew for a fact that no one else could.

Mikey was more than just a cute face. He loved his role among his family. It didn't bear nearly half the maturity and responsibility that went along with being the "leader", or the scientist/doctor, or... umm, the maniacal-psycho-trying-to-cheat-death... still, it was equally important. Michaelangelo brought more than the gift of laughter or the enlightenment of pop-culture: he kindled the very flame that was the heart of his family.

Michaelangelo was hurtled suddenly from his thoughts. The recited list of his favourite reality tv shows fell short off his lips. Had Raphael just squeezed his hand?

"Raphy?..." Mikey voiced nervously. "Come on, Raphy, it's my Mikey! Come back to us Raphy... Can you hear me? Let me know that you can hear me..."

Michaelangelo leaned forward as he tightened his grip on Raphael's hand. He examined his brother's face for any sign of comprehension, but his efforts remained unrewarded. Just as he was about to give up, he felt another distinct jerk on his own hand. There was no mistaking it this time! Raphael just moved!

"Raphy!" Mikey cried happily, his face beaming and eyes watering with unbridled joy.

His happiness was annihilated, horribly so, when Raphael's body started jerking and heaving violently in a fit that looked like a seizure. Michaelangelo backed away in horror as Raphael's hand lurched out of his grasp. He searched to find his voice as he watched his brother shake and flop around on the medical cot with such harrowing vigour, that Mikey could hear his brother's shell smack against the metal of his bed. The rhythmic beeping resounding from the tiny

heart-monitor increased viciously in an angry tempo, as if voicing it's own alarm at the trepidation of the sight.

Finally, after a few terrifying seconds that cut through Michaelangelo's chest like a rust-encrusted dagger, the terrified turtle found his voice, and shouted in a bloodcurdling scream that could have stopped the Earth's rotation itself, " ***Donatello!*** "

To Be Continued...

A/N:

Dum dum dum! I revised the last chapters, and there is only one more chapter left! plays suspenseful music

Expect the conclusion to be posted next weekend. Oh wait... I have people staying over at my house all weekend... so don't hold your breath...

As usual, I have notes for my reviewers... but I shall post them no longer on I have recently learned that it's against policy to do so. Therefore, I will be posting *Notes to Reviewers* in the future on Mickis' new forum *Stealthy Stories* . I will also be editing my previous chapters, and moving the past *Notes to Reviewers* there as well. You will soon find the url linked from my profile page.

Well, *Notes To Reviewers* will appear there as soon as Mickis gives me an author's account... look for them in the next couple of days! Thank you so much for reviewing, and thank you for reading! I hope everyone's summer was fabulous, and that Halloween was memorable!

Hope

Disclaimer: I don't own the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, and this story is purely for non-profit.

Notes To Reviewers:

Yes, this is indeed the last installment!

Thank you everyone who reviewed this fic! I have left a quick note the reviewers of chapter 7 on the *Stealthy Forums* website, and you can find a link there on my author's profile page.

In the meantime, a big warm hug and thanks goes out to all who's reviewed! Thanks, **blueraven, Buslady Of SoCal**

captkablooey, CheatersBaby, Chibi Rose Angel, Dierdre, EagleFox, eldarsevenstar, jigsaws231, kaya lizzie, Leo Oneal, Linz1224, Lunar-ninja, majinme, Melodist, Mickis, Mikaela's Spade, misterfooch, pacphys, Pi90katana, Ramica, Raven001, The REAL Cheese Monkey, Sassyblondexoxo, Shadowflame611, Ted, Tewi, and **Vampy** ! I really appreciate you all!

(PLEASE tell me I didn't forget anyone!)

A special thanks goes out to my love, **captkablooey** , who makes me feel like I'm *more* than a silly fangirl... even though I'm really not! hehe!

Chapter 8: Hope

The echoes of his brother's scream reverberated intensely in Leonardo's ears, lingering long after Mikey's ravaging torment had died away into deadened silence. A void devoured the lair and

swallowed the family of mutants, voraciously consuming Leonard's breath, his heartbeat, his hope..

Donatello hastily scrambled out the door, traversing the cluttered mountains of computers and machinery that lined his science lab. He effortlessly leaped over bushes of tangled wires, his nimble feet easily encountering the scarce specks of bare flooring. As he exited, Donatello smoothly vaulted overa few of the neglected heaps of abandoned electronics that were overtaking the ground. The practiced manner in which he flawlessly navigated himself through his chaotic room proved that it had been rejected in this state of disrepair far too long.

Leonardo jumped to his feet ungracefully, and swiftly proceeded to trip over a milk crate overflowing with circuit boards. He stumbled after his brother as quickly as the metallic mess permitted.

The two turtles barged into the medical lab and greeted the disturbance with opposite reactions. Leo froze at the abhorrent sight, while urgency compelled Donatello to move even faster. Raph convulsed violently, his quakes rapidly gaining in momentum. His body thrashed vigorously, his jerking movements tearing at his stitches, and his wounded shoulder splattering blood that gushed through his bandages. *Oh god,* Leo thought hopelessly, *he's having a* ***seizure!***

His awareness barely registered Splinter as the rat dashed into the medical lab, his movements surprisingly nimble for his ancient bones, and with a bundle of items cradled protective against his chest. There was nothing Leonardo could do; he was utterly helpless. Lacking any serious medical skill or knowledge, he could only stand on shaky legs and gawk with unbelieving eyes.

Leo's body and mind were paralysed. His eyes were imprisoned with morbid fixation, unable to turn away from the demons pillaging his red-banded brother, red like his spilled blood, red like the Leo's tinted and collapsing world...

The stabbing pains in Leo's chest finally relented and dissipated, replaced by an infiltrating numbness that darkly enveloped his body in a cruel embrace. Trepidation slithered into his perception, constricting him sinisterly, and injecting it's merciless toxins.

Leonardo began to catch bits of rushed conversation passing between Donatello and Splinter as they circled Raphael. They looked as powerless as Leo felt. He eventually noticed that Donnie kept repeating the word "convulsions" instead of "seizure", but Leonardo didn't know what that meant, if anything.

A horrible gurgling noise invaded his ears, sounding quite unusual and alarming, and so alien that it demanded Leonardo's attention. Forcibly tearing his vision away from the medical emergency before him, he found the source of the awful sound to his right. Mikey stood faintly at his side, his face paling into a complexion unhealthier than Raph's current one, if that was remotely even possible. Micro tremors attacked the orange-clad turtle's body until even his enlarged eyes seemed to bulge and tremble.

Leonardo heard Donnie call out his name, though just barely. His head whipped back around looked into the face of his brother. It was only a flash of a moment, but the crystalline unspoken message that transpired between them carried a lifetime of words. With the elapse of one pained heartbeat, the moment had passed; Leo nodded his understanding and Donatello concentrated again on Raphael.

The sorrowful expression on Don's face was heart-wrenchingly transparent. Leonardo knew what had to be done. If Raph were to pass away in this horribly violent manner, it wouldn't be how Leo wanted to remember his brother.

Leonardo grabbed Mikey and pulled him tightly against his plastron. He couldn't feel the pain of his bruised ribs as he pressed his shaking brother against himself for comfort.

The act of turning away from the rest of his family tore at his soul and almost withered his resolve. It was the most difficult task he had

ever faced, but he somehow managed. It had to be done; his and Mikey's presence would only have encumbered Donatello's efforts. Sparing them both from potential trauma, Leonardo solemnly led Mikey out of the room, closing the door behind him.

As the door latched with a fine clatter, the situation maliciously struck him very hard, and very abruptly. His world began to spin dizzyingly around him, and he attempted to fight it. Leo tried to focus on the stale russet bricks of his home, and attempted to smell the stagnant atmosphere of the underground. He desperately tried summon his senses, but he couldn't. He felt like he was tumbling into darkness as his vision blurred and darkened. He swayed on his feet, convinced he was about to collide into an eclipse of desolation. Yet through his devastated obscurity, he felt a warmness tighten around his torso, the first physical sensation he felt since he had entered the medical lab. With his embrace, Michaelangelo kept them both upright, catching Leonardo before he fell.

Gathering strength they currently didn't possess, Leo and Mikey staggered down the hallway on wobbly legs. Leo was starting to recover marginal amounts of brain power, just enough to realise he needed to find a place to sit, and quickly, before one of them collapsed.

Left. He didn't know from where the direction came. It took him a moment to realise the voice was inside his head. He blindly obeyed.

Tottering through the hallway, a large brown rectangle materialised through Leo's foggy vision. It took a long moment of stumbling stubbornly forward before he realised it was indeed their tattered old couch, decaying from a long life of weathered abuse, but a couch nonetheless. He bit his cheeks in concentration, and distractedly wondered why his vision was so obstructed, why his eyes burned and protested the light, why his face stung with irritating wetness, and why his chest and throat felt so swollen...

They almost made it to the couch. It was nearly within grasping distance when Mikey's knees buckled, bringing them both to the

ground in an exhausted heap. Their limp bodies unfolded willingly onto the chillingly lifeless floor. Leo didn't really mind; it was an acceptable compromise, and definitely an improvement to standing.

Resting from the surprisingly arduous effort of walking, Leonardo became adamantly determined to calm himself down. He closed his eyes briefly and focused on regulating his breathing. He took a few shuddering and painful breaths before he started to improve. He let himself succumb to the increasingly even rhythm of his heart, letting his pulse guide him away from ominous shadows of his fears. He remained that way until his own tranquility weaved it's way to Mikey, who's trembling then tapered down.

"It's not fair," Mikey muttered, his voice stifled against his brother's body. He plied himself away from Leo's plastron, and scooted on the ground until his shell was leaning against the couch. "It's not fair!" He continued in a tone that was quickly gaining heat. "Raph needs a hospital... or... or a surgeon... or... a *team* of doctors..." Mikey's voice hiccuped anxiously as he stuttered. "he got hurt h...helpin' the city, and he's gonna... a...alone in the sewers..."

"He's not alone," Leonardo corrected him in a grieved voice. "He's loved.. loved more than most have ever known..." Leonardo hadn't seen much first-hand exposure to other families, but he nevertheless knew no one could match the love that the turtles had for one another.

"It doesn't look good... He's... he's..." Mikey couldn't say it, and Leonardo couldn't finish the sentence for him. No, Raph wasn't dying. He couldn't die. He *wouldn't* die. Raph wouldn't leave them like this, not now, not ever, and especially not on their *birthday* . Fate was cruel, but it wasn't that heartless...was it?

Leo didn't want to believe it was true. No, there was still hope, there was always hope, for without hope or faith, there was nothing.

Leonardo sluggishly shimmied himself toward the couch. The pain in his chest had returned, and he noticed how his shallow breaths

peaked with a flaring of stabbing sensations. He did his best to dismiss the discomfort as he rested immobile by his brother. He grabbed Mikey's hand firmly in his own. "No, he isn't, Mikey," Leonardo responded, surprising himself by his own confidence, and realising that his words weren't empty consolations. He believed them.

The orange-clad turtle looked at Leonardo expectantly, a soft glimmer of hope flickering in once-despairing eyes. Energy quickly fled from Leo's voice, leaving him incapable of uttering further words, but apparently what he had said was enough.

Nearly exhausted past the point of reasoning, Leonardo almost wanted to sleep. Even the pain in his side, though sharp and piercing with every breath, hardly mattered anymore. He could have lost consciousness if not for the severity of the situation keeping him wide awake.

They sat together in silence, drawing comfort and strength from each other's presence.

Hope, yes. There was always hope.

Leonardo noticed immediately when Donatello stepped out of the medical lab. His brother's movements were slow and lethargic, his feet a silent whisper, as though he was careful not to shatter the porcelain atmosphere he left behind. Donnie didn't walk all the way into the living room, he merely remained in the hallway. The three brothers swapped glances with one another, Leo and Mikey both desperately trying to get a read off their other brother. It was impossible, Donatello looked pale and about to faint. His expression was anything but reassuring.

Then slowly, a weak smile graced Donatello's features. It was contagious, and quickly mimicked by the other two brothers. Donnie nodded his head, then silently returned to the medical lab. No words were spoken, no details interchanged, or explanations voiced. None

were necessary. All that mattered was that Donatello had rescued them all from destruction, at least for now.

Raphael was alive.

"You're suffering from a condition called pneumothorax," Donnie explained gravely, "on top of that, three of your left ribs are bruised, and the bottom one is clearly cracked."

Leonardo stared dumbly at what was supposedly an X-ray of his torso. He took a moment to let himself feel frightened by the fact that Donatello did indeed have an X-ray machine. How was that even possible? Was creating such a machine not beyond his brother's means? Wasn't that dangerous? Did Donatello just... irradiate his body? The notion was disquieting, and Leonardo couldn't escape the feeling that Donatello was wielding weapons of mass destruction in his science lab. Yet, Leonardo had to admit he knew nothing of the science behind such a machine. He even knew how illogical his thought process sounded in his mind. For the time being he would just suppress his concerns.

Leonardo squinted as he focused back on the X-ray, but didn't notice anything out of place, he couldn't even find the crack that "clearly" afflicted his bottom rib. He gave up his effort, dismissed the X-ray, and instead inspected his brother. Donatello looked back with concern, searching Leo's face for a reaction.

Leonardo stared back at Donatello blankly for a moment, unwittingly exposing his confusion. He blinked once, then questioned, "Numer...thora... hmm? Pardon?"

Donatello sighed and pulled a weary hand over his face slowly, his three fingers rubbing deeply onto his exhausted eye lids, before slowly making their way to his lipless mouth. "Pneumothorax," he repeated in a worried voice devoid of energy. He hadn't rested, this ordeal weighed heavily upon him, and now he had two injured brothers to care for. "Your left lung is partly collapsed, but before you

get upset, I want you to know that I'm convinced that it will improve by itself. This explains the sharp pain and dry coughing you experience when you breathe. "

Donnie paused and waited for Leonardo to respond, but his brother continued to stare at him with an unnervingly blank expression. Donatello sighed again, this time in a more exasperated manner, then continued speaking, "This isn't uncommon with the nature of your injuries. I don't know what pummeled your side, but it got you good. With appropriate rest, and absolutely *n* o exercise, your lung should re-inflate itself as your body heals."

Leonardo finally reacted. He opened his mouth to speak, as Donatello watched eagerly and leaned forward with anticipation. "Okay," Leo said simply. "Is there anything else?"

It was Donatello's turn to give Leonardo a blank look. *"Anything else?* " the purple-banded turtle repeated incredulously. "You *did* understand what I said, Leo, right?" He seemed almost disappointed that Leonardo hadn't become upset.

Leonardo nodded his head nonchalantly, "Of course. Partly-collapsed lung, beaten ribs. It's all quite clear to me." Perhaps Leo was too mentally exhausted and spent, leaving him unmindful of his own physical state.

Donatello looked at Leonardo very strangely. "You don't seem to care!" He threw up his hands in frustrated defeat. "Look, Leo..." he addressed very sternly, his voice saturated with built-up frustration and anger from Raph's near death experience. "You may not seem to take this seriously," he continued, "but if you *don't* get rest, your condition will get *worse* ." His punctuated tone might have been angry if he hadn't been so tired. "You'll be no good to Raph or the rest of us if your lung collapses *entirely* ! If you aren't completely honest with me, and continue to make bad decisions, like when you ran with Raphael in your arms, then you'll get very sick."

Leonardo had winced at the words "no good to Raph or the rest of us", and further squirmed when Donatello had said "bad decisions". He was still struck with guilt over Raph's close-call, convinced that he could have prevented the entire situation if only he had performed better in his leadership duties. He couldn't even bring himself to treat his own ailments, and not only because he felt that they paled in comparison to Raph's wounds. Was he punishing himself? Was he terrified that if he stopped devoting his attention to Raphael, that his brother would leave him for good?

Leonardo would have to meditate on these matters, but not at present. For now, he took Donatello's lecture to heart. His brother was right, of course. Neglecting his needs only made things worse.

Donatello's face softened as he observed Leonardo's depressed posture and expression. He was only worried, and perhaps a little frustrated, but not angry. Don's eyes reached out to Leonardo with concern and empathy, seeming to understand what was going through the blue-clad turtle's head. He rested a hand on Leo's shoulder in an apologetic gesture, then spoke delicately, his stressful mannerism abating into compassion. "I'm not a real doctor, or a surgeon, not really. There's only so much I can do. I can't fix your lungs myself, so we need to handle you pneumothorax *now* , while it's still minor and manageable. Right?"

"I'm sorry Donnie," Leo said sincerely, "Of course I understand what you're saying. I'll take good care of myself, I promise."

Donatello smiled and slumped into his chair, having expelled at least some of his concerns. "Good. Then you can go to your bedroom and get some rest."

Leonardo's eyes widened in alarm, and he dropped his jaw like a young child who had just been denied dessert. "But Raph..."

"Raph is in good hands," Donatello interrupted in a clipped voice. "You made a promise, now keep your word and go to bed."

Leonardo loathed being treated like a child. He wondered if this was how Mikey felt, and couldn't suppress further uninvited feelings of guilt. He supposed it was a side-effect of being protective siblings. They didn't have many loved ones to personally care for, except each other. Donatello left the room and returned to the medical lab where Raph still lay unconscious, leaving Leonardo in trust that he would do the right thing.

The blue-banded turtle knew he had no choice but to retire for the evening, though grudgingly. He doubted he would be able to actually sleep. Mentally, he wasn't tired at all, even though his physical reserves of energy were tapped dry. Perhaps he would meditate, or at least lay down on his appealing futon.

With all the craziness and stress tormenting his mind, Leonardo he was beginning to suspect that he may never sleep again.

Leonardo tried to stifle a yawn, and failed miserably. He was thankful that neither Splinter or Donatello were around to notice. Both had been getting on his case about requiring rest. Leo was touched by their concern, but didn't need sleep, at least not mentally. He got plenty of rest sitting on his chair by Raphael's side. He couldn't leave his vigil, couldn't they understand that? How could he sleep when his brother was in such a horrible state? He at least agreed to relinquish his seat and recede to his bedroom every night, giving his lungs and ribs unhindered rest. Yet during the daytime, he couldn't leave his post. He would have to be dragged against his will, but with his injuries, getting manhandled by his family was thankfully not an option.

At least Mikey seemed to understand. He frequently brought him meals and well-received words of encouragement, refusing to leave until Leo had finished every last drop of food. If it weren't for his brothers, who would never eat. His appetite was non-existent while his Raph lay unmoving and rasping for breath.

Leonardo was worried, damn worried. Raph's bruises were hardly improving, especially around his swollen unbandaged shoulder. Only some of the marks on his face had faded into a grotesque taint of yellowed brown. His bandaged shoulder had ceased to bleed, the gauze and cloth remaining an emaculate white whenever his wounds were redressed, but his overall colour hadn't improved.

It had been several days since they had brought him back to the lair, wounded and beaten. Several days since his "seizure"... Donatello seemed convinced that the convulsions that attacked his body weren't actually a seizure, but the symptoms of shock... some sort of shock... the name of the actual term currently eluded him. Either way, Leonardo was still being eaten alive by his concern, a worry that was strengthened by every passing moment when Raphael failed to awake. His wounded brother needed sustenance. There was no IV to feed him. Nothing keeping him alive, other than a facecloth trickling droplets of water into his agape mouth.

Donatello was extremely worried too, and he couldn't hide it from Leo. He would reassure an anxious Mikey that Raph would be alright. He would tell Leo to get some rest, reminding him that Raphael wasn't going anywhere. Yet Leo could see it written all over his face, see the dread surfacing in his eyes, see the concern swirling through his facial expressions.

Donatello was still beating himself up over his own inability to give Raphael a plasma transfusion. The blood loss was why Raph still looked so horrible, showing hardly any signs of improvement, and why he hadn't yet awoken. It was the reason why Leonardo was so frightened for his ailing brother. Raph needed blood, and they couldn't supply him with any. He needed food, and they couldn't feed him in his unconscious state. Without access to either, the odds were working against Raphael.

The door creaked as Splinter slowly opened it, and gracefully slinked into the room as if careful not to disturb Raphael's slumber. The aging rat sat next to Leonardo, on a chair by the head of Raphael's bed. His head declined mournfully as he stroked his son's face

tenderly with emaciated hands. Without raising his head, he whispered audibly enough for Leonardo ear's to capture. "Raphael is a survivor; his mind will fight, and his body will heal. He will return to us."

Leonardo couldn't bring himself to be comforted.

They remained in silence as his father continued to caress his son's motionless head. Eventually he stopped, and turned to look at Leonardo.

"My son," he spoke quietly, "I have meditated many hours, and have made a difficult decision."

Leonardo looked up at his sensei curiously, nodding respectfully in response.

"I speak of this to you first, Leonardo," the aging rat elaborated in a somber tone. "Your brothers look to you for support and leadership. It is essential that we remain undivided. Only through unity, may we survive and flourish."

The sobering and purposeful nature of his father's speech communicated more than his words, and Leonardo started to dread his father's decision.

Splinter frowned with soft sadness, but continued speaking with unwavering eye contact. "You fought honourably my son, but the battle you described causes me great deal of concern. Now, more than ever, the above world drifts further from our grasp. "

Leonardo was getting uncomfortable quickly. He didn't like where this was going, not in the slightest.

"It is through inaction that all things fall into place..." Splinter spoke wistfully, but he also seemed unconvinced. It was rare that the ninjitsu master strayed from confidence, proving to Leonardo that his sensei had been left with no other choice. "It is important that we

exercise patience, and remain underground until further light has been granted onto our situation."

Despite himself, Leonardo spoke, his words escaping unsolicited. "We can't go topside anymore, can we." It was clearly not a question, but a statement.

Splinter's ears drooped with obvious displeasure at the claim, but he didn't argue, for Leonardo had been correct. The turtle couldn't conceal a look of utter dismay from his face, no matter how much he respected his father. Leo remained silent, shocked and physically unable to voice any complaints. Splinter continued in a saddened tone, "Our numbers are too few, while the Foot's warriors are too numerous. We can no longer afford to patrol the city at night."

Leonardo couldn't believe what he was hearing. How could Splinter be saying these things? Sure, they got their shells kicked, but they couldn't just surrender their freedom! It was a risk Leo was willing to take, if it meant the safety of men, women and children. Women like the one he saved a few nights ago...

Splinter could read Leo's thoughts. "I know this troubles you greatly my son, but this is a conflict that surpasses our abilities. It is a battle that the city of New York must learn to rise and embrace. Perhaps then we may return to our regular routine..." Splinter trailed off and glanced at Raphael, knowing he didn't need to finish his sentence from the look on Leonardo's face. He saw guilt, sorrow, frustration... and understanding.

Splinter couldn't further endanger the lives of his sons.

Leonardo felt slightly selfish, but he certainly didn't want to risk loosing his brothers either. If their family was disrupted with tragedy, they would be useless to everyone, be it the citizens of New York, or each other.

He was starting to accept in his heart what Splinter was saying, though his mind was screaming to rebel. He didn't say anything for

fear that he would loose control and shout out his distress. He bit his tongue and retained his dignity with fluctuating repose.

It wasn't going to be easy, convincing his brothers that this was for the best. They would demand revenge for what happened to Raphael. *He* wanted vengeance himself. And Raph... oh, Raph... his hot-headed brother would loose his mind cramped in the sewers... Even the endless underground was too small for his angry red-banded brother.

Splinter smiled sadly, but his eyes glowed his pride in his son for comprehending and accepting his decision. He continued to speak with his gentle Japanese accent. "We must take many precautions. I would have waited to speak of this matter, but already our resources and supplies are nearly exhausted. When there is absolute need to venture to the surface, the outside world, all four of you must journey as one. None may depart alone, not even you, Leonardo."

Splinter's speech finally came to a conclusion, and Leonardo nodded, his mind overactively reflecting upon his father's words. He had a feeling that their training would also increase tenfold, once their injuries had recovered.

There wasn't anything left for Leonardo to look forward to, save Raphael's possible awakening. Splinter slowly stood up, his ancient bones creaking more than usual, and his balance wavering until he managed to straighten his posture. He leaned heavily on his walking stick as he gazed down upon Leonardo thoughtfully, before carefully emphasising, "I believe in you, Leonardo." A hand stretched out, barely steady, and rested upon the turtle's shoulder. Leo looked up at his father with sad voluminous eyes, allowing his sensei to see patience beyond the young man's years. "I believe in you all," he concluded before turning away and gradually making his way out of the room.

Leonardo sighed heavily after his sensei had disappeared. He hung his head in his hands in a very resigned gesture. Splinter was right, now wasn't the time to be thinking of the overbearing circumstances

that lurked topside. The growing army of Foot soldiers would unfortunately have to wait.

The first sign of good news arrived a few days later, and in the form of fluttering eye lids.

"Raph!" Leo exclaimed with unbridled joy. He leaned forward far too quickly for his damaged lung and ribs, and acidic pain raced long his side. He had to wipe away the tears in his eyes with a shaky hand before he could see Raph's form clearly. Leo was relieved to see that his brother's eyes had indeed opened, and were now looking around the room in confusion.

Leonardo moved more carefully this time, bringing himself as close to his brother as the medical cot allowed. Raph's eyes wandered until they drifted in Leo's direction, where the blue-clad turtle waited with bated breath. After all this time, with the oxygen deprivation in the lake, his stopped heart, and the convulsions earlier in the week... was his mind damaged, or intact? Was Raph still himself?

"...Raph?" Leonardo implored his brother for a response. He was met with dazed eyes that barely revealed a hint of recognition. "Raph, can you hear me? It's Leo, Raph... You're going to be okay. Just hang in there."

Raph looked at Leo with something new in his eyes... was that... vague amusement?

"Leo..." he responded sluggishly, "You've always... had... a funny definition... of 'okay'..." His voice was husky, breathless, and choppy as he struggled to use his lungs properly and force air through his chapped throat.

Still, it was the same old Raph inside that beaten body that lay before him.

Leo once again had to wipe salty wetness away from his eyes, but this time it wasn't from any physical pain.

"Raph," Leo uttered while trying to hide a choked-up quality that threatened to expose him for the sap he was. "Good to have you back, Raph." His brother moaned his answer, a pitiful and breathy croak that formed in the back of his throat, barely managing to steal past his tongue. Leo didn't know if it was in response to physical pain, or Leo's heart-filled welcoming.

Yup. Same old Raph, alright.

"Listen Raph, I'm going to get Donnie," Leonardo said carefully while grasping Raph's bandaged left hand delicately, careful not to jostle his bruised shoulder. "You have to stay awake. Do your best to stay with us, okay Raph?"

Leo's words were met by another groan, this time irritated like a restless winter wind. Same old Raph.

With a final squeeze, Leo braced himself against the pain in his ribs, an agony that he was almost accustomed to, and hurried to the medical lab's door. He threw it open and let it rattle noisily. He was so happy, that he was giddy.

"He's awake!" Leo shouted with overflowing excitement that spilled from his lips and warmly embraced the dreary atmosphere of the lair. "Raph's awake!" His family's response was varied, including crashing sounds as everyone literally dropped what they were doing, the thunder of racing footsteps as certain family members dismissed their ninja training, and a few whoops of joy from a certain overzealous brother.

Leonardo rushed back to Raph's side, who's face was contorted further in pain with every moment he confronted lucidity. With increasing concern Leo patted Raph's head with a cloth in a comforting gesture, and trickled fresh water from a washcloth down

the wounded turtle's parched throat. His kindness was reimbursed with annoyed grunts and pained moans.

The rest of the family spilled through the door anxiously, thrilled that Raphael had finally spared the time to return to the world of the living. Unable to contain their excitement, three brothers rambled on with their greetings, all addressing their concerns and apprehensions at once, in a rumbling symphony of rushed speech

"Raphy, you're okay! I thought..."

"...you look pale, do you need more..."

"...shouldn't be in that much pain, I'll need to..."

"...asleep for a whole week! I was so worried..."

"...we missed you, I couldn't imagine..."

"...perfectly immobile, else you'll tear the stitches..."

"...and cookies, and your favourite: chocolate marble cake, and..."

"...wrong? Do you have a headache? Do you..."

"...bed rest for a few weeks, with a strict diet of..."

"...and hot cocoa and peanut butter cups, and then we..."

Poor Raphael looked like his head was going to explode, and his twitching eyes rotated between squinting in distress, and widening in horror at the smothering display of affection from his brothers. Splinter quickly rescued his overwhelmed son by stepping forward and staring in annoyance at his standing sons. With practiced expertise, he cleared his throat loudly in a near-growl that projected over the medley of words, causing everyone to snap their mouths closed in obedient response.

Splinter tried to looked stern, but he succumbed to his fatherly love and smiled kindly upon his sons. Without pause, he skipped directly to the matter at hand. "Michaelangelo, prepare broth for your brother," he ordered. "Donatello, fetch additional pillows, quickly!"

His two sons didn't even nod, and merely dashed out the door, having recently reacquired their ninjitsu agility. No sounds were heard, except the occasional yelp and clamor of pots from the kitchen as Mikey struggled to make soup in his anxious condition.

Splinter smiled and looked down lovingly at a grateful Raphael. "My son," he soothingly whispered, cautious of the red-banded turtle's apparent headache. "It is a relief to see you awakened. How do you feel, my son?"

Raphael couldn't help himself. Through his pain he gave his father a funny look, as if to say "stupid question," but he managed to force a real answer in his raw voice, "Been better."

Splinter smiled sadly, brushed his son's forehead warmly, and told his son to lie easy, that all would be well, but that he had to stay alert.

Splinter then turned to Leonardo, and spoke softly, "I shall prepare tea for Raphael, keep him company until I return. Ensure he remains awake. I shall return momentarily."

Leonardo nodded, but Splinter's form had already slipped out of the doorway. He turned back to Raphael, carefully monitoring his facial expression, determined to keep his dear brother awake until they got some nutrients into his weak body. An amused smile stretched away the worry from Leo's face when he saw Raph try to shift around in his bed, but he was too sedated, and his diminished strength disallowed him any significant movement. It was certainly a change of pace to have Raph as helpless as a newborn kitten, a peace Leonardo may certainly learn to appreciate now that his brother was in the rebound.

Leonardo laid a hand on Raph's arm, trying to mimic his father's comforting touch, and succeeding as his brother's meager efforts were abandoned. "It *is* nice to have you back, Raph," Leonardo beamed. "You've been out of it for a week, you know, while I sat here worrying..."

Raphael gave Leonardo an annoyed look, obviously surpassing his monthly quota for touching family moments. Raph's eyes were far more alert, possibly from his sobering pain, or his stubborn battle to conquer his weakness. The injured turtle studied Leonardo for a moment, then muttered weakly, "S'that why ya look like hell?"

Leo blinked in surprise, temporarily speechless. He hadn't expected his brother to be so observant, let alone voice his remarks so openly. He supposed Raph was hoping to change the topic from *himself* , but Leonardo wasn't going to let him off the hook so easily!

"Look who's talking," Leo said with a smile, then tried to chuckle in amusement. His injured lung stifled that attempt, and he was launched into an attack of heaving coughs instead.

When he recovered, he was stunned to see Raphael was looking at *him* with concern. He couldn't understand why, Leo wasn't the one who had almost died this week!

"S'wrong, Leo?" Raph slurred fainting, failing to hide his concern in his quiet tone. When Leo didn't answer, Raph easily filled in the blanks. "Yer hurt, n'exhausted, n'stuff."

Leo felt uncomfortable, not only because Raphael was repeating what everyone had been telling him all week, but because *Leo* was supposed to be taking care of his wounded brother, not the other way around!

Leonardo started to voice a complaint, but he hesitated, and Raph spoke again. "I'm fine. Go. Rest." His eyelids started drooping heavily, the conversation stealing what little endurance remained in his faded body.

Leo was instantly startled. Who knew how long it would be before he awoke again, and without nourishment, he may *not* wake again...

"Hold on," Leo urged, "stay awake, Raph. Stay with us, you need to hold on until Mikey and sensei return with food."

Raphael grunted in disapproval, but nevertheless reopened his eyes with articulated strain. Leo needed to distract him from succumbing to the clinging tentacles of oblivion, but Raph was one step ahead of him.

"Ya gonna get some rest?" Raph asked slowly, elongating his words unwillingly in his weakened state. "Or babysit me instead?" He tried to smile, but it faltered quickly, and his brow furrowed in pain.

Leonardo's face softened in sympathy, and he tried to smile reassuringly for his brother's sake. "Babysit? ...possibly," he said playfully. "Probably."

Raph's face warped into a disappointed scowl, which looked quite comical coming from his decrepit state, until his expression slacked and his eyes again closed.

"No, Raph," Leonardo spoke sternly, frustration masking his deep concern. "Stay *awake,* Raph. Come on."

Raph's eyes shot open, and a determined glean shone in them. He tried to smile again, and this time he managed. "Can't sleep," he voiced breathlessly with increasing weakness that bothered Leonardo, "not while knowing... you're starring at me... it's creepy.."

Leonardo chuckled heartfully despite himself, doing his best to subdue a coughing spell that threatened to invade his chest. "Well, get used to it Raph," he said lightly, "because until you're up and at 'em... Raph? Raph, *what* are you doing!"

To Leonardo's exasperation, Raphael was making a renewed effort to raise himself from the table. His body trembled violently as he

tried to lift himself with his battered left arm. Leonardo stood up abruptly from his chair when Raphael's effort didn't cease. He tried to lower his brother gently, but was surprised to feel resistance in his *supposedly* ill brother. "What are you doing!" he repeated in alarm.

Raphael let himself fall gently back onto his cot, panting heavily, and eyelids flickering in exhaustion. "Gettin'.. up and at 'em," he repeated Leo's words stubbornly in between heavy breaths.

Leonardo wiped his bald head with his hand in a nervous gesture. Raphael was himself, alright, a little *too* much himself.

His father and other two brothers choose this moment to bustle back into the room, to Leonardo's relief.

He stepped back and allowed them to prop Raphael up on pillows, gently encouraging him in the process. Leonardo watched his family fondly as they slowly helped his brother drink his tea and broth. He watched with a fond smile, and felt his muscles melt as he relinquished tenseness and stress.

He observed his family with immense pride as they supported Raphael, tenderly holding a cup of tea to his lips, and patiently letting him drink at his own exhaustedly slow pace. Mikey radiated like a proud father, his appearance accurately reflecting his fatherly attitude he exhibited toward his brothers during the past few days. Donatello's smile grew larger with every sip of broth their brother took, knowing that each drop was going a long way to his recovery. And Splinter... Splinter, who had been so strong for everyone during the past week... Leonardo could have sworn he saw tears brimming in his father's eyes, if only for a moment.

The picturesque scene filled Leonardo with a warmth that lent strength to his spent body. It blossomed in his chest, billowing upward to meet his watering eyes. Such emotion was too much for his body to handle, and his body brimmed and overflowed with tears. He was overcome by an elation fueled by love, one so powerful and complete that it tore at his heart with an extreme mix of sadness and

joy. An overwhelming and confusing combination of sensations so powerful, that to resist them would bring him to his knees. He would never want to resist them, though. He greedily drank it up, relishing the moment for ever second it was worth. He couldn't remember a time he had been happier.

This was *his* family. They had each other, and no matter what happened, they would always be a family. It was their love, their loyalty, their undying devotion that made the turtles who they were. They were brothers, blessed with a caring father.

It dawned on him just how precious a gift they all were. If they changed, or fell ill.. when they weren't themselves, and when they were kept from performing in their everyday routine... it could never change the way he felt about them.

Their love was their greatest gift.

The End.

For now...

Author's Notes:

Awww, sappy happy ending... I hate happy sappy endings! But I respond well to threats left by my reviewers, demanding that I keep Raph alive. So I did.

I hope everyone's happy that I had to suffer through writing a sappy happy ending, and that everyone's alive! lol, just kidding.

... BUYAH! Complete! It's complete! Oh, feel the sappy happy ending. *Be* he sappy happy ending...

Did you think Raphy was going to die, for real? Well, I almost killed him... but where would that have left my first TMNT fic? I didn't want to set a bad precedent!

Let me know what you think! PLEASE READ AND REVIEW! I love to hear feedback! Thanks in advance!

... I can't believe it's complete...